

THE BELL MOUNTAIN SERIES | BOOK NINE

The Throne

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How the Chiefs Received a Message

A little girl with a piece of charcoal in her hand happily scribbled on a sheet of parchment, absently humming a little tune that never quite got anywhere. She sat alone by a high stone wall, where the sun struck it on what might otherwise have been called an unseasonably cool late summer day. She had long, fair hair and wore a faded blue dress, shapeless, but lovingly and sturdily made. Her desk was a flat stone, which King Ryons used for the same purpose when he was here. He hadn't been here for a long time.

The child hummed. Birds sang in the trees. For this place was an unused wall of the ruined castle at the royal settlement of Carbonek, in the heart of Lintum Forest. The king's people were busy farming, building, and preparing food and clothing, but from here you couldn't see or hear them.

"Jandra, where are you?"

A young woman came around the far corner of the wall. She stopped and smiled when she saw the child preoccupied with her task; but the smile fled when she realized what the girl was doing.

“Oh, no, baby—you can’t do that!” she cried. Parchment was in very short supply at Carbonek, it mustn’t be wasted. She stepped toward the girl to make her stop—but only one step.

Out from behind Jandra, where the woman hadn’t seen it, burst a hellish, hissing bird with sharp teeth in its beak. It put itself between the woman and the child, raised high its long, stiff tail, and spread its wings. It had claws on its wings. It was only about the size of an ordinary chicken, but its threat display stopped the woman in her tracks. It rattled its dirty purple plumage at her, hissing like a snake.

The bird had never threatened her before, and Abgayle, Jandra’s foster-mother, was upset.

“Jandra, I’ve been calling you!”

The girl looked up and smiled at her. Abgayle supposed she was five years old, but no one knew for sure. Helki had found her wandering alone on the plain north of Lintum Forest and brought her back for safekeeping. No one knew what had happened to Jandra’s family: presumed dead, killed by Heathen raiders.

“What’s the matter with that bird today? Make him stop!”

Jandra chuckled, because it was funny, and made a little peeping noise. The bird glared at Abgayle, but lowered its tail and reshuffled its feathers. Head bobbing, it walked out of Abgayle’s way.

“Silly bird,” Jandra said.

“What have you been doing, baby? Let me see.”

Abgayle knelt by Jandra and looked over her shoulder. What was this? Expecting to see little more than wavy lines and squiggles, Abgayle found the sheet overwritten

with orderly rows of what could only be letters—which was startling, because Jandra didn't know how to write. Abgayle could read a little, but these were no letters that she had ever learned. Even so, she knew writing when she saw it.

“Where did you get the parchment, Jandra?”

“Fnaa gave it.” Fnaa was the boy who was King Ryons' double, ordered to stay behind at Carbonek when Ryons went East to fight the Thunder King. Fnaa knew how to read and write.

“Did Fnaa show you how to do this?” Abgayle asked. Jandra only shrugged. Abgayle stood up and took her hand. “Come, let's find Fnaa and show him this. He'll read it for us.”

The bird followed them. It never let the girl out of its sight.

The people of Carbonek held Jandra in awe because she was a prophetess. God spoke through her to take Ryons out of slavery and make him king. She had since delivered other prophecies, and not one of them had ever failed to come true.

But this was the first time she'd ever written anything—if it really was writing—and Abgayle felt uneasy. The last time God spoke through Jandra, it had been to declare that He would speak through her no more, until she was much older. “But He didn't say anything about writing!” Abgayle thought.

They found Fnaa tending a little patch of beans planted by his mother. This late in the season, there weren't many beans left. But what he really was doing was looking for interesting insects.

Jandra slipped away from Abgayle and trotted up to Fnaa. "Look, Fnaa!" She handed him the parchment.

"What does it say?" Abgayle asked. "Can you read it? Jandra wrote it."

Fnaa was small for his age, half-Fazzan, slightly darker than an Obannese. In all ways, except one, he was an exact double of the king. Both heads bore shocks of rich, black hair, but Ryons' hair had a red streak in it, proclaiming his descent from holy King Ozias, Obann's last anointed king. That streak in Ryons' hair had only come into being after the boy king had experienced a strange vision, alone at night in the forest.

"I can't read this," Fnaa said, perplexedly studying the letters. "I mean, these aren't the letters that everybody uses."

"It's just something she made up?"

He shook his head. "It looks like it must mean something. Maybe it's old-fashioned letters and old-fashioned words. It looks a little like Gurun's writing. Obst would know."

But Obst, their teacher, and Gurun, their queen, were both lost with Ryons in the vastness of the East.

Jandra's bird caught a black beetle and ran off with it. Jandra chased him, giggling. Fnaa and Abgayle exchanged puzzled looks.

"Have you taught her how to write?"

"Only the regular letters, and she forgets them in a day or two," Fnaa said. "I never taught her these letters."

"Then what are we going to do?" Abgayle said, for it seemed urgent to her that the words be read and understood. If they hadn't come from Jandra, they may have come from God.

Ryons had left half his army at Carbonek to guard the settlement and deal with any emergency that might arise. The king being still a child, it was the decision of all his chiefs in council. But it was hard on those who stayed behind, to carry on without a single word of news.

Ryons had a throne at Carbonek—not a real throne, but a broken-off piece of the castle that the king could sit on. “I will set Ozias’ throne in Lintum Forest” was God’s word, delivered through Jandra. The chiefs could have ordered the creation of a gorgeous throne by master artisans in Obann City. But they hardly dared think how much they missed their king and feared for him, and when they set their chieftains’ stools around the makeshift throne, its presence engaged their love for him.

They also kept in the circle the empty stools of their brother chiefs who’d gone into the East.

It was a sober group of men who gathered around the throne, before the yawning, broken gap of the main gate of the castle, to see and consider Jandra’s parchment. Those settlers who could find space for themselves were up on the walls or gathered round the chieftains, for the matter concerned them all.

Chief Buzzard, for the Abnaks, tattooed after the custom of his people, shaven-headed but for the dangling Abnak scalp lock; Zekelesh, of the Fazzan, in his wolf’s-head helmet; Tughrul Lomak, chieftain over the kilted warriors of the Dahai; young Andrus, captain of the Obannese scouts—these were the chiefs commanding this half of Ryons’ army. It seemed to them very long ago that they came into Obann as members of a Heathen army of the Thunder King. But

they were Heathen no more: the true God counted them among His servants.

In the midst of them, newly returned from his reconnaissance of the mountains and the foothills that sheltered Obann from Heathen lands, stood Helki the Rod, the biggest man there, in the crazy patchwork garment in which he'd prowled the forest all his life: the last man to see King Ryons descending the mountains to be swallowed up in the Thunder King's domain. Next to him stood Fnaa, like a puppy beside a full-grown mastiff. Fnaa was there because he was the only one present who could read and write.

"So you see, Warlords," he said, "that there must be some meaning in this message. But the writing is like the writing in the Scrolls of King Ozias, so old-fashioned that only a sage could read it."

"It pleases God to pose a riddle for us," said Zekelesh, "but how we're to solve it when there's no one who can read it—that I don't see. Still, I'm glad we haven't been left altogether without a prophet. It must be easier on the child to write than to speak."

"There must be someone, somewhere, who can read it," Helki said. "Maybe it's news of the king. But if Fnaa can't read it, I don't know who can."

"Oh, I know!" Fnaa said. "Prester Jod could read it easily. Send it to him, and he'll tell us what it means."

The chiefs exchanged doubtful looks. This should have been the obvious solution, but it wasn't.

"The way things are in the city, who knows if Jod is even still alive?" said Tughrul Lomak. "And if he can read the ancient writing, so can others—maybe some who shouldn't read it. The last we heard from Gallgoid, every good man in

Obann is in danger.”

The others nodded. The Chief Spy’s messages out of Obann City had become few and far between. He admitted to having difficulties getting his messengers through the gates.

“Is Gallgoid still with us?” Chief Buzzard said. “If they ever catch him, that fellow Chutt will hang him from the highest gallows he can build.”

“If getting out of the city is hard,” Helki said, “what about getting in? That might be even harder.”

“I can get in,” Fnaa said.

Buzzard laughed out loud. “Ho! Have you forgotten you’re the king’s double? One look at you, and that’s the end of you.”

“He’s not going anywhere near the city!” said Fnaa’s mother, Dakl, from the front rank of the crowd.

“I could dye my hair red, like I did the first time I went back to Obann,” Fnaa said. “Somebody has to get in! And Prester Jod is my friend, and Gallgoid knows me. I’d like to see any of you chiefs try to get in—even you, Chief Buzzard.”

“It wouldn’t be the first time we sent a boy to do a man’s work,” Helki said. “And if Gallgoid’s still at liberty, he’ll find a way to get you out again. But how would you get in? They’re guarding all the gates.”

“I’d get in the same way I got out last time with Gurun and Uduqu—by a secret tunnel under the walls. I remember where it is.”

“They have patrols all around the city now,” Tughrul said. “You might not make it to the tunnel.”

“It’ll be easier for me to hide, than for a grown man.”

“This is shaping up to be a very foolish plan,” said Zeke-

lesh. "I'm for it! God wouldn't give Jandra a message in writing, or any other kind of message, if it wasn't important."

"It's too bad Obst isn't here," Buzzard said. "But for all we know, we'll never see old Obst again. They've all ridden off into nowhere."

"But we will see King Ryons again!" said Fnaa. "It was God who made him king and put his throne right here where we can see it. And God said I should do whatever came into my heart, and He'll protect me. That's what Jandra said, and I believe it. If you want to know what the message says, I'll have to deliver it to Jod."

Dakl was too horrified to speak. But Helki said softly, "Then I reckon I'm in favor of it, too."

In the City

In the city there were two great powers, with room for only one. Gallgoid the Chief Spy labored diligently to build up the weaker so that neither one could reign supreme.

Lord Chutt ruled as governor-general over a reconstituted High Council of the Oligarchy. Ryons' advent—perched atop the great beast that came up from the river to scatter and destroy the Thunder King's army just as it was on the point of taking the city—had put an end to the Oligarchy. But Lord Chutt had brought it back.

It was not Chutt, but Ilfil the Wallekki, who had reported to the city that King Ryons was dead. Chutt did everything in his power to persuade the people of the city to believe it.

Gallgoid smiled to himself, relishing the taste of irony. It was Ilfil who was dead—murdered in broad daylight in front of hundreds of witnesses.

Gallgoid was still in a position to advise Lord Chutt. The man still listened to him. "My lord," he'd said, more than once, "Ilfil had no way of knowing anything that's happened east of the mountains. Will it not prove awkward for us"—he always made sure to say "us" instead of "you," because Chutt picked up on things like that—"if the king returns?"

"I think that's unlikely," Chutt said. "He invaded the

lands of the Thunder King—the real Thunder King!—with a piddling little army and no chance of survival at all. He'll never come again."

Chutt was the only one of the last High Council to have survived the siege of Obann, having fled into the north before the Heathen had closed their ring around the city. There he'd built up his strength, and now he was a mighty man, made so by his possession of the vast quantity of gold he'd salvaged and brought down from the Golden Pass: the ruins of the Thunder King's golden hall, smashed flat by an avalanche. It was Chutt and his gold who would rebuild the Temple of Obann, destroyed by the Heathen, and then the great Palace of the Oligarchs, consumed by fire.

More irony: Gallgoid himself, as the servant of the late First Prester, Lord Reesh, had had a hand in the destruction of the Temple, brought about by Reesh's treachery. "I am here now as the servant of a king who may be dead already," Gallgoid thought. "A fitting penance." Among his other duties, he'd been Lord Reesh's favorite poisoner.

But the most delicious irony of all lay in his efforts to build up the only power in Obann that could maybe rival Chutt's—

The Thunder King's.

In a fine townhouse in the heart of the city dwelt Ysbott the Snake, outlaw, murderer, chased out of Lintum Forest by Helki the Rod.

Obann City knew him as the Thunder King.

Ysbott had burrowed like a worm into the depths of the ruined mass of the golden hall and had come out with

the golden mask of the Thunder King. Few living men had ever seen that mask, but there was no one in the East who didn't fear it. With it Ysbott had become the dreaded god of Lord Chutt's Wallekki. And their chief, Ilfil, who had seen through the pretense and fancied himself the master, Ysbott had slain with his own hands.

Tonight he dined with his slave, Dotter, the only man in Obann who was allowed to see his face. Wallekki guards stood outside the room, with orders to kill anyone who tried to approach the door and disturb their god at his dinner.

"The mortal guise he must adopt, because he wishes his people to be able to see and hear him, is a nagging annoyance to him," Dotter had explained to the warriors. He used to be a slave trader and spoke fluent Wallekki. "If any of you should ever see the mortal face he wears, that man shall die as Ilfil died."

Dotter had hired a chef, and tonight he and Ysbott dined on roast beef and assorted dainties. It was a far cry from the kind of fare that he had been used to in the forest.

When Ysbott had had his fill, he said, "You can bring in my new captain now, Dotter. I hope you've made a good choice."

"I'm sure of him, my lord," said Dotter. He always called Ysbott "my lord" because he was afraid of him. They'd started out as partners, but now Dotter was the slave—and lucky to be alive, he reckoned. Some of Ilfil's blood had sprayed his face when Ysbott had killed him.

Dotter went out and returned with a tall, fiercely bearded man whose eyes darted this way and that when he found himself in a locked room with the golden mask.

"Ilfil died because he was too smart, yet not smart

enough,” Ysbott had explained to Dotter when he’d ordered him to find a replacement. Ysbott had some two thousand Wallekki for his bodyguard—they were to have been Lord Chutt’s bodyguard—and they needed a commander. Dotter had selected one.

“This is Bassas, my lord, son of Shaheer, of the Wal Miri. He’s very strong, and the men respect him,” Dotter said.

Ysbott let the mask stare at the man for a minute or two. The mask had power; let it work. Bassas visibly suppressed the urge to fidget. Finally, the Thunder King spoke.

“Does this man understand, as the commander of my warriors, he will have gold, horses, and servants?”

“He does, my lord.”

“And that he will obey me in all things and see that every man of mine obeys me, or else I will destroy his body and swallow up his soul?”

“He does, my lord.”

“Then let him speak his oath.”

Bassas’ mouth was dry, and it took him some moments to find the nerve to speak: good, thought Ysbott, very good. Bassas spoke haltingly in Obannese, Dotter having drilled him in what he must say and how to say it.

“I swear as my tribe swears to devote my blood and flesh to you, the god above all gods, and if I do not, may this oath kill me.”

He took a deep breath, then drew a sharp knife from his belt and gashed a deep cut on his forearm. He held it up for the mask to see, the blood running down to his elbow.

“Your blood is accepted, Bassas,” Ysbott said. “You are the commander of my men. Go down now, and feast on

anything you'd like. Choose the best horse for yourself, and find some slaves to serve you. Go now."

Bassas kissed the fingertips of both his hands, the Wallekki gesture of most profound respect. Dotter let him out and locked the door.

"There are a few chiefs' sons who won't like being commanded by a commoner," Dotter said. He'd tried to instruct Ysbott in the ways of the Wallekki, but Ysbott wasn't interested.

"He can prove himself by how he deals with them," Ysbott said.

Overnight, Dotter reported the next morning, Bassas had killed a highborn man who'd questioned his right to give orders.

"Killed him with a single blow of his fist," Dotter added. "A lucky blow."

Ysbott grinned over his chilled breakfast melon.

"I think you've chosen wisely, Dotter. Now enjoy your breakfast. These honey-cakes are very good."

But Ysbott's grin had stifled Dotter's appetite. Ysbott had a terrible scar on one of his cheeks, and it looked even worse when he grinned. Dotter didn't know how he'd come by it, and didn't dare ask.

As the First Prester's vicar, Jod held the First Prester's seat on the High Council whether Lord Chutt liked it or not. He was also, and had long been, the most popular man in Obann. It used to be just for his good looks and lordly bearing, but the people had learned to admire him for other things.

This morning Jod had a delivery from the baker's boy. He'd been expecting it, and so had sent out his cook and his butler to buy certain things and had invented errands for his other servants so they'd be out of the house for a time.

"I hope you'll be careful," he told the boy. "The Wallekki watch my house by day, and Lord Chutt sends his spies by night."

"I saw a few of those Heathen out there," said the boy. "You can bet I'm careful. I only came to give you this." He handed Jod a piece of reed paper folded small.

So thorough were Gallgoid's security measures, Jod knew, that his messengers didn't even know they were his messengers. He was sure this boy had never heard of Gallgoid. Jod tipped him a copper penny and sent him on his way. When he was alone, he unfolded the message and read it.

"The Wallekki have a new commander, named Bassas, a superstitious fool whose habit is violence. We shall not meet tonight."

Jod sighed and burned the note to ashes. Throughout his life, he'd never been much troubled by the thought that he would someday die. But with the threat of assassination looming over him, his peace of mind was not what it used to be.

He wished Lord Orth would come back, but also prayed he wouldn't. The First Prester was safe on the other side of the mountains, preaching God's word to the Heathen—safer among them than he would be here in the city. Chutt wanted a new First Prester, one who would approve the building of a new Temple. So Jod followed Orth's custom of opening his house once a week to feed the poor at his

own table. In addition to being pleasing to God, it enhanced his popularity. Maybe it was keeping him alive. But in the meantime Chutt was using his gold to buy presters and reciters who would happily vote to remove Orth from his post. He was already minting gold coins.

Jod was glad he'd sent Preceptor Constan out to Durrurot with the Scrolls of Ozias and all the most learned scholars from the seminary. The great work of copying and distributing God's word would continue.

Alone in his house, he went upstairs to his prayer closet to pray for Gallgoid's safety and Lord Orth's—and his own. But most of all he prayed for King Ryons to return.

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