

THE BELL MOUNTAIN SERIES | BOOK THREE

The Thunder King

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CHAPTER 1

Rain

On one of the last peaceful nights they would know for a long time, a boy and a girl, and a man who had been a paid assassin, made camp under the shelter of three stinkfruit trees, and after a meager supper, looked up at the stars. Hidden safely among their gear were long-lost books of Scripture, which they couldn't read.

Behind them, a few days' journey to the west, lay the city of Obann, where the Temple stood, and across the river from it, the ruined city where they'd discovered the scrolls. Much closer, and surely gaining on them, came pursuit. The man was resolved that if the pursuers caught them, he would have to kill the children he'd sworn to protect. They mustn't be taken alive by servants of the Temple. He ought to know: he'd been one for most of his life.

Far to the east of them lay Lintum Forest, and friends who would protect them. In between were Heathen armies, great hosts marching one after another to the city of Obann, which they'd vowed to destroy.

"The world still hasn't ended," said the boy, Jack. "I thought it would have all of a sudden. I never thought it'd be months and months."

"It isn't going to end. Everyone was wrong about that," said the girl, Ellayne, who had become something of a

heretic on the subject.

Together, in obedience to a calling that had come to them in dreams and that they believed was a commandment from God, Jack and Ellayne left home and climbed Bell Mountain (a story that has been told elsewhere). There they found the bell that King Ozias had erected on the summit in ancient times, hidden in the cloud that always blanketed the peak. According to what they'd been taught, when someone rang that bell, God would hear it and unmake the world. Jack and Ellayne believed God had chosen them to ring the bell. They obeyed—but the only thing that happened was that the bell fell down and broke; and for the first time in the memory of man, a wind came and blew away the cloud from the top of the mountain. But later they were told that everyone in the world had heard the bell and wondered what it was.

Martis, the assassin, had been sent by the Temple to stop the children from ringing the bell. In that mission, he failed. Out of fear of God, which was a new thing for him, he took up a new mission: to guard the children and protect them from the Temple.

There was one more member of their party, a man-like creature about the size of a large rat. He, too, guarded the children. He was an Omah, one of the little hairy men who inhabited the ruins of great cities that were destroyed in the downfall of the Empire, so long ago. They'd named him Wytt, short for Manawyttan, a hero in an ancient romance that Jack thought, privately, was a lot of nonsense: girl stuff.

Wytt stood up, sniffed the air, and chattered.

"He says it's going to rain tonight," Jack said. Since

they'd rung the bell, he and Ellayne were able to understand the Omah's not-quite language. But Martis couldn't.

"I hate getting rained on!" Ellayne grumbled.

"Don't be ungrateful," Martis said. "If it rains hard enough, it'll wipe out whatever trail we've left."

It rained on Lintum Forest, too. In the old ruined castle that his people were working on every day to turn into a place to live, the boy who was to be King of Obann lay awake on a bed of ferns. He had much to think about.

His name was Ryons, but that was a new name. He'd been born a slave, and if his mother had ever given him a name, no one ever thought to tell him what it was. For most of his life his masters simply called him Gik—which wasn't a name at all, but a foul and ugly word in their language.

Now he had clean clothes, a horse that he hadn't learned to ride, and a small army of desperate men from many different Heathen countries. These were the men who called him king—they, and a little girl who made prophetic utterances that no one understood, and a half-crazy old man who spoke all the languages in the world without knowing how he did it, and who'd taught the army to worship God instead of idols and devils. Even if Ryons had grown up in a nice home with parents who told him fanciful stories of olden times, he never would have heard a story half so fabulous as the one he seemed to be living in.

Tonight he lay awake thinking of what would happen after the Heathen armies of the Thunder King battered down the walls of Obann and destroyed the Temple, as they'd taken oaths to do. An emissary from that power had

promised him that once Obann had fallen, those armies would march to Lintum Forest, burn it down, and take him away out East to their master—who would have his eyes put out. He would live out his whole life blind and in captivity, unless the Thunder King thought of something worse to do to him.

The general of King Ryons' army—he'd be the general until the chieftains chose another—was a Lintum Forest woodsman named Helki. Helki the Rod, they called him, for the staff that was his weapon. He dressed in rags and patches, and laughed at the emissary's threats.

"Pay those fools no mind, Your Majesty," he said. "I reckon they talk that way to keep their spirits up. Like as not, most of 'em will never come back alive from Obann. Trust in God!"

Ryons had never even heard of God until lately in his life; and so it was natural for him to lie awake on a rainy night, worrying about what would become of him. Nevertheless, he did fall asleep at last, and when he did, he had a dream. He dreamed he was high up somewhere, looking down on a host of men who fled from something that terrified them out of their senses. They were Heathen warriors, and as they ran, some of them looked back over their shoulders; and Ryons saw mad panic in their upturned faces. Strangely, although they seemed to be running as hard as they could, they never seemed to get farther away from him.

Ryons remembered the dream in the morning, and wondered what it could mean.

It rained on the city of Obann, too, where men by the

thousands labored night and day to strengthen giant walls that had never been tested by a siege. Others brought in wagon trains filled with provisions, while other wagons rolled out of the city to take women and children and riches to faraway cities where they might be safe. But there was no order for evacuation, and many families chose to stay together, here. If Obann fell, no place would be safe.

Lord Gwyll, one of the six oligarchs on the ruling council, commanded Obann's armies and had charge of the city's defense. Judge Tombo had the task of keeping order in the city, which mostly meant clearing the streets of deranged prophets who spoke of downfall and doom. Sometimes he would have one hanged, thinking it would discourage imitators. Lord Gwyll disapproved of this policy, but because it had the tacit support of the Temple, he forebore to speak his mind.

Quietly ruling the Temple and its business, as he had done for many years, was the First Prester, Lord Reesh—Martis' former master. His preachers promised the people that they would prevail: with God's blessing they would shatter the invaders and then march over the mountains of the east and destroy all Heathendom forever. Lord Reesh was old, but he conserved his strength. "You'll live a long time yet," his friend, Judge Tombo, often said. "You're like me—too wicked to die."

Uppermost in the minds of every living soul in Obann, from the ruling oligarchs down to the lowliest scullery maid and the beggar in the street, was a single thought.

In unheard-of numbers, with siege machines and armor and fanatic zeal, the enemy was coming. And he would be here very soon.

A Dance of Predators

Morning came, clear and sunny, with a smell of summer in the air.

“There was enough rain to soften the ground. We’ll leave tracks,” Martis said, as he and the children started their day’s journey. Martis always worried, Jack thought. And answering himself: well, he was a servant of the Temple, and they sent him out to kill us. He must have good reason to worry.

With Martis on foot they could only go so fast, and they all knew it wasn’t fast enough. Dulayl was a fine horse, but he couldn’t carry three riders; and Ham the donkey, who carried their gear, had no speed at all. Martis always looked for terrain where their trail would be hard to discover, but that wasn’t to say he always found it.

They’d only been on their way for about an hour when Wytt stood up on Ham’s pack and chattered excitedly.

“No need to translate!” Martis said. “I hear the hoofbeats, too.”

Horsemen were coming. Jack and Ellayne both heard it. There wasn’t so much as a shrub to hide behind, and the only weapon they had was a knife in Martis’ belt.

“They’re not coming from Obann,” Ellayne said. “They’re coming toward us, not after us.”

“Remember, you’re my grandsons, and we’re just simple refugees,” Martis said. “Let me do the talking. It’s probably a scouting party from one of the armies. They may just let us pass.”

Soon enough, they saw the horsemen—half a dozen of them, at least, heading straight for them. There was no point in trying to escape.

But these weren’t from any army that belonged to Obann. They wore tall headdresses and robes that billowed out behind them.

“Heathen!” Jack said.

“Wallekki riders,” said Martis. “I didn’t expect to see any this far west so soon.”

“What’ll we do?” Ellayne cried. “They’ll sell us into slavery!” Better that than be taken by the servants of the Temple, Martis thought, but didn’t say.

“Just don’t try to run,” he said. “Do you see those two archers? No one can outrun arrows.”

Black-bearded, swarthy men with flashing white teeth—not like anyone who lived in Obann, Jack thought—rode up and surrounded them. The two archers had arrows fitted to their bows. The other four brandished small spears, and they all had swords in tasseled sheaths.

Martis held up his palms and spoke to them in their own language. In his service to the Temple he’d been on several missions to the East, beyond the mountains. He knew the people and their customs.

“Who is this who speaks our tongue so beautifully?” said one of the riders. “It would almost be a shame to slay him.”

“Shoot him down and be done with it,” said another. “Is

he not a dog of a westman? But the two children are worth keeping—and the horse.”

But Martis clasped his hands together, shook them at the riders, and shouted at them something that sounded like “Ah-hannah wa-tay! Ah-hannah wa-tay!” Jack and Ellayne understood not a word of what followed, but Martis explained it to them later.

The riders scowled, and with poor grace kissed their palms, displayed them to Martis, and lowered their weapons. The arrows went back into quivers.

“Who taught you those words, westman?”

“Warrior, it matters not from whom I learned them,” Martis said. “You have given me the sign of friendship in return.”

A rider spat. “Fa! We are men of honor. We have no choice but to befriend any man who speaks those words. But we don’t have to like it!”

“I don’t mind telling you who taught me the words of succor,” Martis said. “I see by your saddles and bridles that you are of the Shenab tribes, from the south bank of the Green Snake River. The man who taught me the words, some years ago, was A’hail the chief, son of Zamacar the chief, of the Willow Oasis clan—blessings be upon him.”

The riders nodded. “Blessings upon him!” they all said. The one who was their leader dismounted and kissed Martis on the cheek. The riders scowled no more.

“Friend of A’hail, we be thy friends. Azadec am I, son of Raishafin”—as was the custom, he recited his lineage back into the depths of time—“And now, tell us how we might serve you, and with a good will, we shall do it.”

Martis would have liked to ask for a horse; but they

had none to spare, and although they still would have given him any horse he asked for, he'd be ashamed to abuse their friendship. So he thought of something just as good.

"Azadec, my brother," he said, "there are some men following us. They are from the city of Obann. I would be greatly relieved if they followed us no more."

Azadec laughed joyfully, and his comrades grinned.

"Before the sun climbs to its noonday perch, we shall have slain your enemies," he said. "You may consider it as already done. But is there anything else we can do for you?"

"I am already in your debt forever, warriors of Shenab," Martis answered, and bowed. "However, as you can see, I lack weapons. I'd be grateful for any weapons you could spare. And finally, you could tell me how I might best avoid the armies of your people."

Azadec nodded. "You are wise, brother. In our army there are men of many uncouth nations. They would not honor the words of succor. So you would do best to continue on due west. My army marches slightly to the north of your present course, and there is another to the south. We are all marching to Obann, but we go by different routes."

They gave Martis a spear and a short sword, parted from him with much ceremony, and galloped off with enthusiastic whoops to meet the hunters from the Temple.

"So if you say those words, they have to be your friends—even if they hate you?" Ellayne asked, as they resumed their trek.

"If they don't, they are dishonored," Martis said.

“Then how does anybody ever get killed when they fight?” Jack wondered. “If all they have to do is say ... whatever it is.”

“A warrior wouldn’t think of speaking those words to save his life in battle or in a duel,” Martis said. “His own people would despise him for the rest of his life. But I spoke them for your sakes, which was permissible.

“There are good men and bad among the Heathen, just as there are among all people. Remember that.”

“They’re here to wreck our cities and sell people into slavery,” Ellayne said. “They make war against our country for no reason. That’s not good!”

All day long they marched, and stopped to make camp when they found a cluster of trees around a little water-hole. How many camps they would have to make before they reached the forest, if they ever reached it, Martis couldn’t estimate. But at least that day they had no more encounters with troops of any nationality. Wytt found a bird’s nest in the tall grass, and they all had eggs for supper.

Late that night, a series of shrill screams jerked them out of sleep. Dulayl snorted and bucked in his hobbles, and Ham shivered from his long ears to his hooves.

“What in the world is that?” Jack cried.

Martis was already up with the spear in his hands. Wytt chattered in Ellayne’s arms. More screams tore through the night.

Because not knowing was worse than knowing, Jack crept to a tree and peered out from behind it, out onto the plain. A nearly full moon gave him enough light to see.

“It’s two of those big birds!” he said. “They’re fighting. Come and see!”

As Martis and Ellayne joined him, he watched the two great monsters circling each other, darting their heavy heads back and forth, fluttering their puny wings. Each bird was as tall as a horse; each was armed with a massive, cruelly hooked beak. Jack heard sharp clacking sounds as they champed their jaws. From time to time they brought their heads together and loudly rasped their beaks against one another.

“They’re not fighting. They’re mating,” Martis said. “Which means that soon there will be more of them!”

Martis had had a horse killed out from under him by one of the birds, which ambushed him in the forest. He’d also been chased by a pair of them, out on the plain. He’d never been so terrified in all his life.

“I guess that means they’re here to stay,” Jack said. “I wonder if that’s true for all the other strange animals we’ve seen. But where are they all coming from? No one’s ever seen animals like that before.”

“I’ve traveled much,” said Martis, “but never saw the like of some of those birds and beasts that are in the country now. Never heard of any of them, either.”

“God’s not ending the world,” Ellayne said. “It’s more like He’s starting it over, if you ask me—with all new animals. Maybe after the war, if everyone’s been killed, He’ll put in all new people, too.”

Jack looked sharply at her: it seemed like she actually knew what she was talking about. But how could she be right and grown-up scholars all be wrong?

They watched until the birds had finished their mating ceremony. Then the pair of monsters stalked away on their stiff, powerful legs, bobbling their fearsome heads up and

down and making odd little clucking noises, almost like domestic chickens. And the weary humans went back to sleep.