

THE BELL MOUNTAIN SERIES | BOOK FIVE

# The Fugitive Prince

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## Ellayne Has a Visitor

If you have read the books that come before this, you have already met Ellayne. But on this particular summer night, you might not have recognized her.

More than a year had gone by since she and Jack had come home from their adventures. Her hair had grown long again, and she wore it with a thick braid down the back: no need, anymore, to disguise herself as a boy. Instead of her brothers' hand-me-downs, she had on a nice blue dress and new shoes. By the light of a lantern, she was softly reading aloud from an enormous book that lay on the grass before her.

“And then Abombalbab, thinking he might yet save the damsel, leaped lightly from his horse and drew his sword. But the dwarf in the cart cried out as if he were a madman and immediately came galloping forth from the Castle Odious the Black Knight of the Dark Tower—’ Wytt, you’re not listening!” she said.

This she addressed to a little hairy manlike creature no bigger than a squirrel, with no tail and reddish-brown fur over every inch of him. Instead of paying any heed to the story, he kept jumping up and down, trying to catch fairy-flies that were attracted to the light. You or I would call them lacewings, but people in Obann called them fairy-flies because with their silvery wings and delicate way of flying, they looked like fairies. Wytt liked to eat them.

Ellayne’s father, Roshay Bault—once the chief councilor of the town of Ninneburky, but since then created baron of the realm by His Grace the King—lived in the finest house in Ninneburky. He had a stable for his carriage and horses. Between the back of the stable and a dense, high hedge that ran around three sides of his property was a quiet grassy space where Ellayne and Jack liked to sit and talk. Ellayne came there often to play with Wytt. Her mother the baroness didn’t like the sight of him; somehow he made her think of a large rat. But her father understood that the little Omah had more than once saved his daughter’s life, and was glad to have him there. Wytt preferred not to be seen by too many Big People at once and seldom came into the house.

“We can’t treat her like she was made of fine china, Vannett, not after where she’s been. Let her play with the creature whenever she likes,” the baron would say to his wife. And Ellayne’s mother, who was much better about things like that than she used to be, would say, “Well, of course you’re right.”

You know already, if you have read the books, that it was Ellayne and Jack who climbed Bell Mountain and rang the bell—the bell that King Ozias hung there thousands of years ago, so that God would hear it when the time came for it to be rung. This was a great and noble feat; but the baron and the baroness agreed that the children ought to stay home from now on and not live like famous persons.

So they lived a quiet life, Jack having moved in to live as a member of the family. He was probably playing chess right now with the baron in the parlor, Ellayne thought. (Obannese chess is just like ours, only the bishops are called presters and are allowed to make a special move to a different-colored square than the one they started on.) Ellayne's mother taught them their numbers and their letters, and every evening the baron read to them from the New Books. "Someday," he said, "we'll have the Scriptures themselves, the Old Books, in language we can understand. The queen has promised it."

That was one of those things they were working on, far away in the great city of Obann—King Ryons, Queen Gurun, and Obst, who used to be a hermit and had led Jack and Ellayne most of the way up Bell Mountain until his strength failed. They were all terribly busy in Obann. Queen Gurun—who was not truly a queen, but everybody called her one—wrote letters to Ellayne to keep her up to date.

But on this particular summer night Ellayne had no work to do, nothing to worry about. You might think reading to an Omah would be a waste of time, but Ellayne didn't think so. Wytt had no proper language, as you or I know language; but he certainly understood every word Ellayne or Jack spoke to him, and they understood most of what he answered. Whether he understood anything at all about the adventures of Abombalpap is not a question we can answer.

"You might at least stop bothering the fairies," Ellayne said to him.

He showed his teeth at her, an Omah smile. He wore a lock of her hair in a kind of torque around his neck. For reasons neither she nor Jack could ever fathom, which Wytt had no idea how to explain, Omah set great store by Ellayne's hair. She'd met Omah in many different places, and it was always the same: "Sunshine hair," they called it.

Suddenly the grin vanished from Wytt's face, and in the blink of an eye, he vanished into the hedge. He took just time enough to chirp, "Someone coming," before he disappeared. Ellayne wondered who it could be. Once upon a time she would have been alarmed; but what could happen right here at her father's house?

She heard a twig snap—

And then out from behind the corner of the stable stepped the very last person she expected to see in all the world.

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"King Ryons!" she cried.

The last time she'd seen the king was a year ago at his palace in Obann. But the first time she'd seen him was in Lintum Forest, as a refugee. That's what he looked like now: scrawny, dirty, dressed in rags, his dark hair all over the place. You'd have thought he was a runaway slave.

"Your Majesty! What's happened?" It must be something bad, she thought.

“Ellayne?” he said. “You are Ellayne, aren’t you?”

“Well, of course I am. You know me!” she answered. “But what are you doing here? Why aren’t you in Obann, in the palace?”

Somewhere inside the hedge, Wytt started chattering. The king flinched, startled; but he stood his ground.

“Heaven help him,” Ellayne thought, “he looks terrible! What’s the matter with him?” Why, for instance, hadn’t he grown? Ryons himself didn’t know how old he was, having been born into slavery and never taught anything but how to avoid a beating. He was younger than Ellayne, but not by much. They’d been about the same size last year, but now Ellayne was sure she was a little bigger.

But Obann City was a long way from Ninneburky, and anything might have happened—anything.

Wytt fussed something awful. “Not him! Not him!” he chattered.

“Oh, Wytt, please—pipe down!” Ellayne cried. “Go get Jack, bring him here now.” His noise stopped, so he must have obeyed. She turned back to the poor bedraggled king. “Your Majesty, won’t you come into the house and have something to eat? You’ll be safe here with my father.”

He shook his head violently and backed up a step. She was afraid he might run away. What was wrong with him? Had he gone mad?

“Ryons, please, there’s nothing to be afraid of,” she said. “Here—why don’t you sit down? Jack will be here in a minute. You want to see Jack, don’t you?”

“Yes. I want to see him.” The boy looked all around, like a hunted animal, and then cautiously sat down. “But no one else!” he added.

## Chapter 2

# Fnaa

Jack was playing chess with the baron, and winning, too.

He was a black-haired, blue-eyed boy who used to wear shoes only in the winter and he'd had to tie a piece of rope around his waist to keep his pants up. Now, thanks to the baron and the baroness, he had proper shoes, proper pants with a belt, and could read and write, add and subtract, and play chess.

He was about to make a decisive move when Wytt sent up a racket, somewhere close to the open window in the parlor, safely hidden in the night.

“That’s Wytt,” Jack said. “Ellayne wants me in a hurry, but he doesn’t say why.”

“Then you’d better go see what it is,” Roshay said. “We don’t want the baroness disturbed by that noise. I’ll be right here if you need me.”

“But the game—”

“I resign. Go, Jack. Make him stop screeching.”

“All right, Baron.” Jack couldn’t call him “father,” and certainly couldn’t call him “Roshay Bault.” But if the truth be known, the baron was quite fond of his new title; so that was how Jack addressed him.

He rushed out the back door and saw the light of Ellayne’s lantern between the stable and the hedge. Wytt called to him from the dark. “Someone here—come and see!”

“Who’s here, Wytt?”

Wytt didn’t understand human names. To him Jack was “Boy” and Ellayne was “Girl,” and he made up names of his own for other Big People.

“No name,” he answered Jack: which meant a stranger.

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He found Ellayne sitting near the hedge with someone, a boy. When Jack got close enough to see his face, he had a shock.

“What in the world!” he cried. “King Ryons!”

“Shh! Don’t make so much noise!” Ellayne snapped at him. “Sit down and be quiet. The king wants to talk to us.”

Having been on as many adventures as he already had in his short life, Jack knew something was afoot. This was how they started.

He stared hard at Ryons. He might not have recognized him if he’d passed him on the street. This, he thought, was how someone looked when he’d had an adventure that was too much for him.

“Your Majesty, are you all right?” he asked.

“Are you Jack?”

“You ought to know me when you see me!”

And Ryons made a rather ghastly smile and answered, “But I’ve never seen you before.”

Jack had heard stories about people who’d lost their memories. These were not especially accurate stories, but he didn’t know that. Something must have happened to the king to make him lose his memory—fell off his horse and hit his head, got struck by lightning, or just woke up one day and didn’t know who he was anymore.

“What are you doing here, Your Majesty?” Jack said. “How come you don’t know us when you see us?”

“You think I’m King Ryons,” said the boy. “Well, I’m not! My name is Fnaa.”

Jack and Ellayne exchanged a look. Bad enough he’d lost his memory, Jack thought; now he thinks he’s somebody else. But he said, “Fnaa? That’s a funny name.”

“Funnier than Jack?” was the reply.

“Your Majesty—”

“I’m not the king.”

“But you are!” Jack cried. “Something’s happened to you to make you forget.”

But Wytt, who understood everything Jack and Ellayne said, chattered and chirped. He even came out where Fnaa could see him. The king shrank from him. “But he knows Wytt!” Jack thought. “He shouldn’t be afraid of him.”

“Not him! No name!” Wytt would have said, if he could utter human speech.

“He’s saying that you’re not King Ryons,” Ellayne said.

“Do you believe him?”

“Wytt has eyes as good as ours,” Jack said, “and he has a nose, too. Just like a dog. You can’t fool his nose.”

“But you look exactly like King Ryons!” Ellayne said. “Anyone would think so.”

Fnaa gave her a bitter little smile. “That’s what my mother says,” he said. “And that’s why I’m here. To save the king’s life, and my own, too.”

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“You’d better come into the house and talk to my father,” Ellayne said. “He’ll know what to do.”

Fnaa—if that was really his name—shook his head. “No, no!” he said. “I came all the way from Obann just to talk to you—to the two of you, and no one else.”

“But the baron can protect you,” Jack said.

“No, he can’t. No one can.”

“Well, then, what do you expect Jack and I can do?” Ellayne said. “If my father can’t protect you, how can we? We’re just a couple of kids.”

“You are famous,” answered Fnaa. “You went up the mountain and rang the bell. Everybody knows that. God Himself watches over you. That’s what my mother says. She heard it from a lot of people. She sent me to you.”

“But who are you?” Ellayne said.

“And where are we going to put you?” Jack wondered.

“I’m just a slave,” Fnaa said, “and so is my mother. She used to have crazy dreams about a bell ringing, when none of the bells in the city were moving. But then she finally found out about the bell on the mountain, and that was what she heard in her dream. We’re slaves in a great house in the city of Obann.”

“But what do you want us to do?” Jack said.

Fnaa sat up a little straighter. “You’re the king’s friends. You have to take me to the king so he can see me with his own eyes,” he said, “and you must tell him that everything I say is true, so that he’ll believe me and be safe. No one’s to know about it but you, until we see the king.”

“Oh! Is that all?” Jack said. “We take you all the way back to Obann without anyone knowing where we are or what we’re doing, and then take you to see King Ryons. Is that it?”

“Yes.”

Wytt stepped up to Fnaa and touched his hand. The boy winced, but didn't snatch his hand away.

“This is good boy,” Wytt chirped.

“He likes you,” Ellayne said. “He knows about people, what they're like inside, so that's a point in your favor.”

“But we oughtn't to go all the way to Obann, just us!” Jack said. “We ought to take Martis with us. He should come, too.”

“Except he's not here!” Ellayne said.

Martis swore an oath to protect Ellayne and Jack for as long as he lived, for which the king had given him the honorable title of Knight Protector. But with the children safe at home in Ninneburky, Martis got involved in other things as well: and for that reason he was out of town just now, somewhere up in the mountains on some kind of secret business. “Just when we really need him,” Ellayne muttered.

“Listen, Fnaa—you'll have to tell us more,” Jack said.

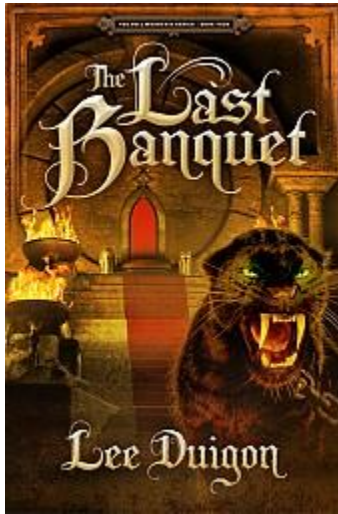
“My mother told me I was to be very careful, even with you,” Fnaa answered.

“But what does Ryons have to be saved from?” Ellayne asked.

“Me,” said Fnaa.

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