

THE BELL MOUNTAIN SERIES | BOOK SIX

The **P**alace

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Obann, West of the Mountains

CHAPTER 1 *Moving Day*

If you've ever had to move, you know how hectic it can be; and that's putting it mildly. It's even worse when you don't understand why you have to move. Some adult has decided it, and that's that. Worst of all is when the reason given makes no sense.

Enith's grandmother wasn't making sense. Just bundle everything up and get out, she said—as if you could fit everything that was important into the back of a cart and leave all your friends behind.

“Act your age, girl. Stop pouting.”

Enith looked up at Grammum, who was about to shoulder a bagful of clothing to take out to the cart.

“I still don't see why we have to do this,” Enith said.

“I've told you a hundred times: because the Lord is going to destroy this city, and we don't want to be here when He does.”

Oh, yes, she'd heard it a hundred times, all right. Ever since they'd started holding assemblies as decreed by the new First Prester, at which nothing was to be preached but the Old Books, Grammum had been on and on about it—the Lord this, the Lord that. And then she took it into her head that the Lord was going to destroy the city.

Enith didn't believe that, not for a minute. Hadn't the Lord made a great miracle to save Obann? Hadn't He sent King Ryons riding on a great beast that was like a walking mountain and scattered to the four winds the Heathen armies of the Thunder King? Enith hadn't seen that because she and all the other children on the block, young and old, had been herded down to Master Harfydd's cellar. And he and Grammum and a few of the neighbors had stood guard with carving knives and cudgels, lest the Heathen should break in. But after it was safe and they all came out again, everyone in Obann was talking about the miracle. One of the first things Enith heard was a young soldier crying, “You should've seen it, Master Harfydd! An animal as big as your house—bigger! And there's thousands and thousands of Heathen dead out there!”

So the city of Obann was saved, even though some of the Heathen did get in somehow and had burned the Temple to the ground.

“Why would God save the city, if He was only going to destroy it?” Enith argued. It was funny, she thought, but when the Temple was standing and she and Grammum were going to assembly every week, they never used to talk about religion.

“Because this city hanged the prophets!” Grammum answered. Whenever she said that, or thought of it, her face got hard. She never liked to talk about it, but she'd witnessed one or two of those hangings.

It was Grammum's claim that God had spared the city for King Ryons' sake—the boy king who came to them on the back of the beast. They said he was a special king, descended from King Ozias whose life story was told in the Scriptures. Enith didn't believe that, but Grammum did.

But King Ryons was no longer in the city; and his council of advisers had taken over the government and named themselves the Ruling Council—to which title, said Grammum, they had no right at all. Enith did not know how Grammum knew such things.

“Get a move on, Enith. The cart's waiting.”

Just then Master Harfydd poked his bald head and round shoulders through the open doorway of their house.

“So you're really going, Nywed?” he said. He was sweet on Grammum. He'd marry her, if she gave him half a chance. He was a nice man, Enith thought, and a rich man with a fine, big house. But not the kind of man to set a woman's heart ablaze, she thought.

Grammum was still very good-looking for a woman of her age, Enith thought. Her rich, chestnut hair hadn't yet gone grey, and her green eyes still sparkled—quite handsome, really. Everybody said Enith looked like her.

“I wish you'd change your mind and stay,” said Master Harfydd. They called him “master” because he owned two dozen barges that transported goods and wares up and down the river, and nobody knew how many trading posts throughout the whole country of Obann. “The danger's past.”

“The king has flown the nest,” said Nywed, “and he won't be coming back. That's sign enough for me. As long as he was here, the city was safe.”

“But a lot of people say the king is feeble-minded,” Enith said.

“Take that bundle out to the cart—now,” Grammum snapped.

Master Harfydd stood aside so she could pass, and Enith tossed the bundle of clothes into the cart. The driver sat patiently, chewing on a long piece of grass. His two mules dozed in harness, idly flicking their tails.

Enith was annoyed at the king. Why couldn't he stay in Obann City where he belonged? Some said he'd gone to Durmurot, out in the west, practically next door to the sea. Others said he was in Lintum Forest, in the east. A few said he was dead—secretly made away with by his council, or fallen down a well or something because he was a ninny.

But Queen Gurun was gone, too, and she was no ninny. She was the one person Enith admired most in all the world. You only had to look at her to see what quality she was. Everyone wondered why she'd left and grumbled about the council's silence on that subject. But if they'd

done away with the king, Enith thought, they'd hardly be such fools as to leave the queen alive— notwithstanding that the whole city would rise against them if they harmed a hair on Gurun's head.

Grammum and Master Harfydd came out to the street together. They stopped by the cart and held each other's hands.

“Stay, Nywed. Please stay.”

“Why don't you come with us, Harfydd?”

He smiled meekly. Grammum knew he couldn't just up and leave his business. She wasn't being fair to him, Enith thought.

“I'll write to you, once we get there,” Grammum said. Considering it was Master Harfydd who'd lent them the cart and the driver, and never asked a penny for it, he ought to get more of a reward than just a letter, Enith thought.

“My travels sometimes take me up the river,” he said. “Maybe I'll stop in and see you after you're settled down.”

“That'd be nice.”

Grammum gave him a peck on the cheek and spryly scrambled up to her seat on the cart before he could say anything more. Enith allowed him to help her up to her seat.

“Thank you, Master Harfydd,” she said.

“Take good care of your grandmom, Enith—and of yourself, too.”

The driver whistled and flicked his whip, and at a slow and steady pace consented to by the mules, they were off.

Off, thought Enith, to a stupid nothing little town called Ninneburky, where nothing ever happened and she would die of boredom.

While Enith and her grandmother were moving, the king's council—minus the king and with no desire ever to see the king again—met behind closed and guarded doors in the chamber that used to belong to the High Council of the Oligarchs. The members of that council had all been killed in the war, except for Lord Chutt who ran away. Lord Ruffin, the governor-general, used to sit at the head of the exquisitely polished table. Now a man named Merffin Mord sat there. He did not call himself governor-general, but as the richest and most ambitious of the group, he acted as its leader. All six of them were held to be equal in authority, but if the truth be known, it was Merffin Mord whose ideas had gotten them into the palace in the first place.

At the moment he was angrily glaring up and down the long table, with his five colleagues glaring back at him.

“I have only misplaced the letter,” he was saying, “and I’m sure I’ll find it soon. But I can’t order my servants to look for it, can I? Better it stay lost, than one of them should find it!”

“Maybe one of them has already found it,” said a thin, sour-faced, grey-bearded man named Aggo. You’d never guess him for a wine merchant, but that’s what he was. “You should have burned the letter, Merffin.”

“That is a singularly unhelpful remark, my friend!”

“Well, I don’t see how we can reply to the letter while it’s just floating around somewhere.”

“Gentlemen, please!” spoke up a third councilor, a little bald man. “We’re all in the same boat, and arguing among ourselves will get us nowhere.”

“Councilor Hendy, you never spoke a truer word,” Merffin said. “I’ll find the letter myself, never fear. In the meantime, we ought at least to be in agreement as to what our answer shall be—to accept the offer, or not to accept it.”

“If we don’t accept, our days are numbered,” Aggo said.

“But if we do, and anything goes wrong, we’re all as good as dead,” said a fourth councilor, Frandeval Forr. The youngest of the group, and the only fair-haired man among them, Frandeval was the richest moneylender in Obann, having inherited the business from his father. All of the other councilors owed him money. “And we still have no certain knowledge of what has become of the king. We can hardly leave that out of our reckoning!”

Merffin Mord glared at everyone again. He was sure of the support of only two of them—Ilas, the Cloth King (as he liked to call himself), and Redegger, who controlled most of the vice and gambling in the city—and both of them were sitting there saying nothing, like a couple of shy schoolgirls. The loss of the letter had very badly shaken them.

“We may as well adjourn the meeting,” Merffin said. “Maybe overnight I’ll find the letter—and some of us will find their nerve.”

“It’s no use trying to bait me, Merffin,” Aggo said. “If you can find the letter, I’ll vote to accept. If you can’t, I’ll wash my hands of the whole business.”

And one of these days, thought Merffin, even as he smiled at the man, I’ll wash my hands of you.



The councilors would have been frantic had they known that, even as they spoke, someone was making copies of the letter.

The Great Hall of the Oligarchs—they called it the Palace now, even with the king gone—was an enormous building. Only the Temple was bigger, but the Temple lay in ruins. In addition to its meeting halls, audience chambers, and conference rooms, the Palace included offices, kitchens, living quarters, stables, storerooms, workshops, a smithy, a wine cellar, and labyrinths of attics and cellars. The rulers of Obann had been building onto it for centuries. No one knew how many clerks, cooks, watchmen, grooms, maids, servants, washerwomen, and fetchers and carriers worked there. Some lived all their lives within its walls.

Galgoid the Spy, a servant of the king and for long an assassin and a poisoner in the service of the Temple, operated in the palace like a spider—silent, unnoticed, with a forgotten storeroom as his office and his home. His agents in the Palace served food, dusted bedchambers, mopped floors, acted as valets, and told him everything they saw and heard.

One of the king's council was his agent, too—a man loyal to King Ryons. Only Galgoid knew which councilor it was. Thanks to this man, Galgoid quickly came to hear of the letter and so arrange for it to be stolen from Merffin Mord's own bedchamber: for Galgoid had agents among the councilors' own households.

This was the letter he was copying, and this is what it said:

*Goryk Gillow, First Prester
By the ordination of His Universal Majesty, King Thunder,
Lord of the New Temple:
To the High Council of Obann,
& to His Lordship Merffin Mord—
Greetings!*

My lords, His Universal Majesty inquires to know the purpose of the most irregular & unlawful election of the traitor, Orth, as First Prester of the Temple in Obann. My lords, how can such things be? For there is no Temple in Obann.

In the late war between us, this Orth conspired with Lord Reesh, then First Prester, to betray your city to our army. They admitted some of our servants into the Temple by a secret passage, & so the Temple was burned with fire & destroyed.

Which was clean against our wishes.

We have erected to the God of Obann the New Temple at Kara Karram, so that it should be the place where all nations shall honor the God of Obann; & we have named our servant, Goryk Gillow, First Prester.

If it be your intention to reject our Temple & our First Prester, well: let there be war between us, instead of peace.

But if it be your desire to accept our friendship, then you must accept our First Prester & acknowledge the sole authority & primacy of the New Temple.

We urge you to make your intentions clearly known, & that without delay.

So speaks His Universal Majesty.

Also, my lords, I regret to inform you that our punitive expedition to Lintum Forest had no success: & also that the villainous & lowborn Helki, the Outlaw, has found a boy whom he proclaims to be King Ryons. Of this we have sure intelligence by many who have fled Lintum Forest and taken refuge at Silvertown, under our protection.

Beware this treason which is hatched in Lintum Forest.

By Goryk Gillow, First Prester, etc.

“Very skillfully played!” said Gallgoid under his breath. This Goryk Gillow had no Temple training, but he seemed to have a gift for the game of treason.

Copies of the letter would be sent to Helki and the king in Lintum Forest, to Prester Jod and Gurun in Durmurot, and to Preceptor Constan and First Prester Orth here in the city. Gallgoid would advise them to be quiet and do nothing until a plan of action could be laid. Besides, there was no telling how the people of the city might react. They liked the king, Gallgoid thought, but didn’t altogether believe in him as the king ordained for them by God and the true descendant of Ozias. They weren’t sure what they believed about him. And the loss of the Temple, for all the people of Obann, was a raw and angry wound that wouldn’t heal.

Last of all, Gallgoid would arrange for the original letter to be returned to Merffin Mord’s bedchamber, where Mord would eventually discover it and never know it had ever left the room.

“It’d be so much easier just to poison them all,” he said. Over the past few months he’d gotten into the habit of talking to himself. There was no one to overhear. “Only I can’t, of course.” That was because the little prophetess, Jandra, when she was leaving the city to return to Lintum Forest, had turned to him and said, “The Lord is with you, Gallgoid. Sin no more.” So he abandoned the thought of doing away with Merffin Mord in some unobtrusive manner. He hadn’t assassinated anyone since then.



At High Market Square, where once the city’s rulers hanged a prophet, a crowd had gathered to hear First Prester Orth dedicate a memorial stone to all the prophets. A delegation of the city’s clergy sat behind him on the platform as he spoke.

“Let this stone be a witness against us to our sin,” he was saying, “and call us to perpetual repentance. For we have been no better than our fathers, who slew the prophets in their time.

“Hear the Scripture: ‘Thus saith the Lord: If my people humble themselves before Me, and repent, and depart from their evil ways, I will take their sins away, and heal them.’ This is our hope, our only hope.”

Behind him, silent, unmoving, sat Preceptor Constan, who directed the immense project of making the Scriptures available to all the people. Since the winter, the presters and reciters in the city, and throughout Obann, had been preaching to the people from the Holy Scriptures, from the Old Books themselves. This was a new thing. Copies of the books were being sent to all the chamber houses in Obann, as fast as Constan’s scribes and seminary students could copy them. Thus were the people to be instructed not in men’s word anymore, but in God’s. Copies were now being made in a few of the other cities. Most of the people of Obann had never heard the actual Scriptures—not in all their lives.

Constan wondered how many of them knew that Orth had been Lord Reesh’s chief confederate in betraying the city to the Heathen—a scheme that was thwarted only by the sudden arrival of King Ryons and the giant beast. Orth had confessed his sin to the College of Presters. They would not let him confess it to the people. But the people know, thought Constan: they must surely know by now. What kept them from rising up against the presters, Constan didn’t know. The city was like a lion crouching in the tall grass, unseen, before springing on its prey with a paralyzing roar.

God’s will be done, he thought. His only concern was to do his duty by God’s word.

“We cannot undo our sins,” Orth said. “But that is not what God asks of us. All He requires of us is to trust in His mercy and to keep His commandments. Let us pray.”

He led the people in a prayer patterned after Ozias’ Song of Confession. Whatever else they thought of Orth, Constan reflected, they couldn’t help responding to his rich and mellow voice, his fine appearance, and his newfound but self-evident piety. Even now the sun struck silver off the silver sprinkling in his sable hair and beard. Constan himself was most often likened to a boulder—massive, grey, immovable. But he felt no jealousy on that account. Orth, he believed, was the only man who could be First Prester in this troubled age. The college had elected him, but God had chosen him.

CHAPTER 2

How Jack Went on a Journey

The Imperial River flows from one end of Obann to the other, from the mountains to the sea. It is the great highway of Obann, carrying trade and travelers, connecting Obann's multitude of towns and villages that grow along its banks.

Baron Roshay Bault, from his home in Ninneburky, had lumber interests in the foothills, supervised by his two grown sons, Dib and Josek. The lumber came down the river in rafts, to be bought up, bit by bit, in the towns along the river.

If you have read the other books that tell of these matters, you will know that Roshay was the chief councilor of Ninneburky, before he became the baron, and the father of Ellayne, the girl who climbed Bell Mountain. She climbed it with Jack, the town carter's stepson, and Jack now lived with her in the baron's house. Ellayne's father taught Jack the use of numbers and money, and her mother, Vannett the baroness, taught him to read.

"Someday, if you have a bent for it, you may join my sons in the family lumber business," Roshay said to Jack. "You have a good head for figures and a fair amount of common sense, and a man must make an honest living. I doubt you would want to be a carter like your stepfather."

After all the adventures he and Ellayne had had, Jack very much relished the prospect of being in the lumber trade. So he was overjoyed when, one day in the middle of the spring, the baron said it was time he made a trip upriver to see the lumber camps.

"And what about me?" Ellayne cried.

Her father smiled slyly at her. "Making you stay here," he said, "is the surest way I can think of to keep the pair of you out of trouble. If I let you go together, you'll get up to something—you have a bad habit of disappearing on me! Anyhow, if you stay here, I'll be sure Jack will come back."

She blushed deeply.

When they set out for Bell Mountain, Jack was small for his age. Now he was a little taller than Ellayne. In those days he wore old clothes that he patched himself and only got his hair cut when old Ashrof could do it. Ashrof now was the prester of the chamber house in Ninneburky, and Jack got his hair cut by the barber. The baron and his wife clothed him in nice, serviceable clothes and put good shoes on his feet. But otherwise he hadn't changed much.

Ellayne had gotten used to wearing her hair cut short while she was on adventures, so as to pass for a boy. Enough time had gone by that that defense wasn't so convincing anymore. She still liked boys' games and had nagged Martis into teaching her the art of sword fighting, but with her hair long and shining golden in the sun, you would never mistake her for a boy of any kind.

Sometimes she was tempted to ask Jack, “Do you think I’m pretty?” But it always seemed like such a lame thing to say, and she was sure he would only make a face at her, if she said it.

For the time being, all she wanted was to travel up the river in the boat with Jack and Martis. (Martis, you will remember, had taken an oath to protect them.) But no amount of sulking would persuade her father to give in, and when the day came for them to depart, all she could do was say good-bye. Any separation from Jack made her quite uneasy, and he didn’t like it, either. But neither of them said so.

“You’re going to have a lot of fun without me, aren’t you?” she said, as Jack helped Martis load the boat. A third man, Herger, one of her father’s foremen, already waited in the stern, holding his paddle. Ellayne wouldn’t show her feelings in front of him, so she took refuge in appearing to be angry.

“I’ll take good care of him,” said Martis—who for most of his life had been Lord Reesh’s most reliable assassin. “We’ll keep him too busy to have fun.”

Jack pretended that he didn’t care.

Martis in front, and Herger in the back, paddled the boat, with Jack sitting in the middle. Whenever the men stopped paddling, the boat would drift backward; so if they really needed to rest, they would have to tie up somewhere.

“I’ll be surprised if I can raise my arms tonight,” Martis said, after a few hours’ work.

“You’ll get used to it before you know it,” Herger answered. He’d been rowing up and down the river for many years—a quiet, bulky, blue-eyed man with a sandy beard just beginning to show grey. Martis’ beard had turned snow-white on the summit of Bell Mountain.

“Is Ninneburky the last town until we reach the hills?” Jack asked.

“That it is—the last proper town with a wall, I mean,” said Herger. “It’ll be a while before we sleep in beds again or eat our supper at a table.”

The baron had sent Martis on the trip because Martis was a killer, albeit he looked more like a clerk. Not that any of Roshay Bault’s men had had trouble on the river, but when King Ryons broke the siege of Obann City, thousands of Heathen warriors scattered in all directions. Some of them were still at large, living from hand to mouth as brigands. They seldom hunted along the river, where there was always a chance of them running into Obannese militia. But the baron judged it best to take no chances and never sent anyone alone to the logging camps.

“I don’t mind camping out,” Jack said. “I’ve done a lot of it, and in much wilder country than this.”

“That’s exactly what my cousin Ekbert used to say, before some Abnaks scalped him.”

“We’re at peace with the Abnaks now,” said Jack. “Martis and I had friends among the Abnaks.”

“So did Cousin Ekbert.”

They passed the blackened stumps of some docks burned by the Heathen when they came that way.

“Were you in Ninneburky when the Zeph attacked?” Jack asked.

“That I was—and I hope I never see the like of it again!” Herger spat into the river for good luck. “Life is chancy enough, without having to worry about wars and battles coming down on you.”

Martis didn’t join the conversation. Jack knew him well enough to know why: he was always thinking of any trouble that might lie ahead, and what to do when they ran into it.

The talk petered out; the men saved their strength for paddling, and Jack enjoyed the scenery. Even more than the scenery, he enjoyed being on the river with the men, being one of them. Someday he’d be a grown man, too. That was something to look forward to.

Ahead of them towered the mountains, and Bell Mountain with its peak laid bare. For untold centuries a veil of cloud had hidden it, but after Jack and Ellayne climbed to the top and rang King Ozias’ bell, God’s hand took the cloud away.

“We did it!” Jack thought. In spite of all the dangers he and Ellayne had passed through afterward, that moment, when they rang the bell, remained to him as though it were but yesterday.

Later in the afternoon, well before sundown, Herger said it was time for them to land and make camp at a good place that he knew. “The water’s quiet there,” he said, “and a nice little creek runs through it. A little later on in the year, there’ll be blackberries. It’s one of those places where the trees don’t quite run up to the river, and you can count the stars to make you fall asleep.”

“How far have we come from Ninneburky?” Jack asked.

“As the crow flies, not so far,” said Herger. “But as the ox draws the cart along the road, about a day and a half’s journey. It’s shorter by water, of course. The road loops around some of the woodier spots.”

“Any villages nearby?” Martis asked.

“Not for miles—no one to disturb us.”

Directed by Herger, they paddled toward a bend in the south bank of the river, a quiet little cove with a lush stand of cattails. A large silvery fish jumped just ahead of them, making Jack wish they'd brought fishing gear. Overhead, a pair of wild geese honked as they flew into the west.

"I don't hear any blackbirds in the cattails," Martis said.

"You will," said Herger.

A few yards from shore, Martis got out with the rope to pull the boat aground. The water came up to his knees. He had just set foot on land when harsh cries broke out from the trees.

"Hi-yi, hi-yi! Yahaa!"

Men charged them, waving clubs and knives, rushing straight at them.

"Back! Back onto the river!" Martis yelled.

But they didn't make it back. Martis stumbled with a splash, and almost fell. Herger was so startled that his paddle slipped from his hands into the water. And by then the men were right on top of them.

The men were wild, and there were too many of them for Martis. Four of them swarmed over him. One he felled with a sharp little knife that appeared as if by magic in his hand. But the other three piled into him and they all went down together. Clubs rose and fell.

Four men laid hands on the boat, violently tipping it back and forth. Herger dove into the water and swam strongly back toward the middle of the river. Freed of his weight, the boat turned over. Jack fell out. Before he could swim a stroke, rough hands seized him and dragged him to the land.

He saw Martis float out into the current, motionless and bleeding.

A hairy, dirty man, streaming with the water, brandished his cudgel and rejoiced.

"We've got him!" he roared. "We've got the king!"