

THE BELL MOUNTAIN SERIES | BOOK SEVEN

The Glass Bridge

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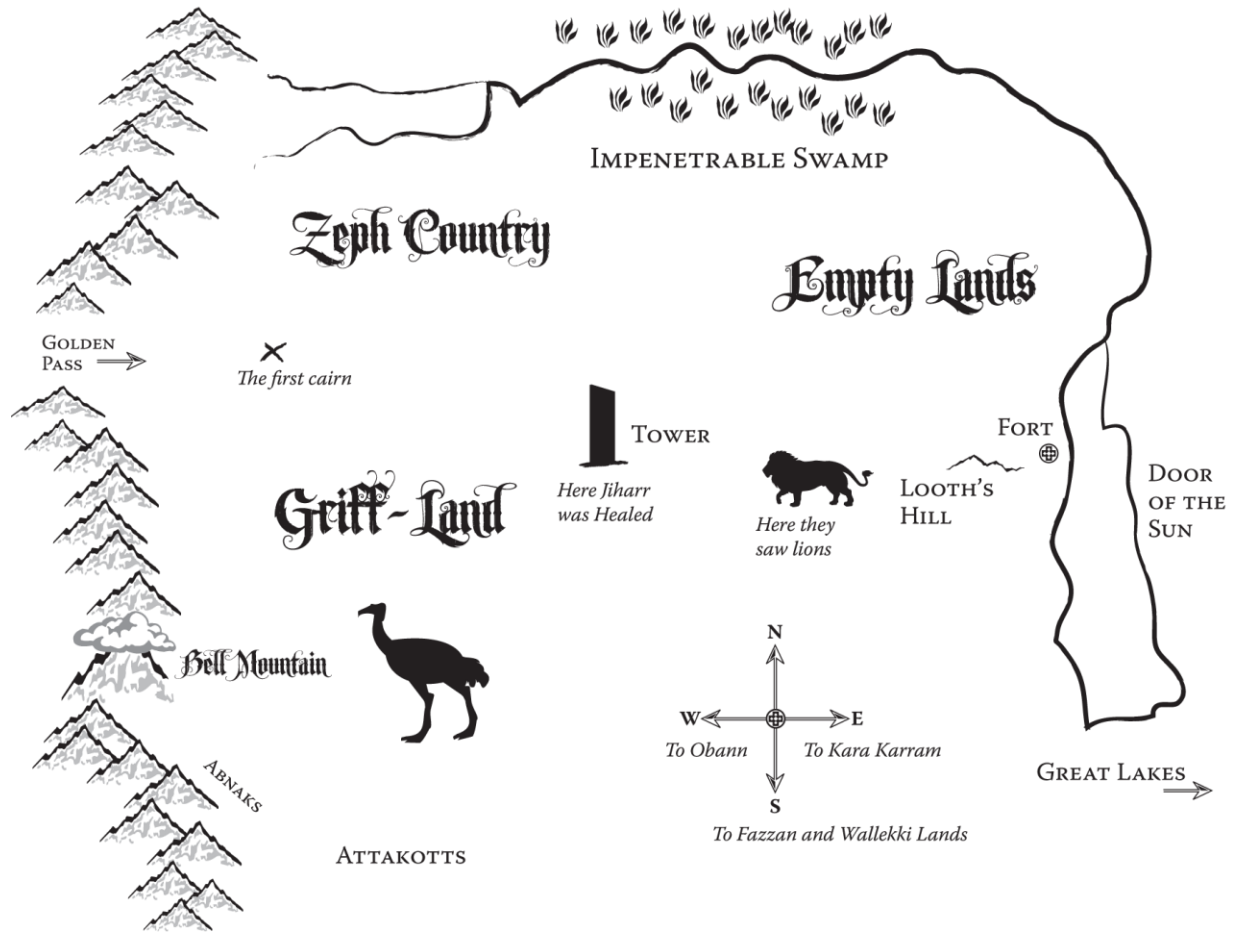
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IMPENETRABLE SWAMP

Zeph Country

Empty Lands

GOLDEN PASS →

✕
The first cairn

TOWER

Here Jiharr was Healed



Here they saw lions

FORT

LOOTH'S HILL

DOOR OF THE SUN

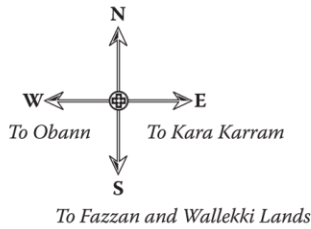
Griff-Land

Bell Mountain



ABNAKS

ATTAKOTTS



GREAT LAKES →

CHAPTER 1

How Ellayne Learned of Her Future

“And so when the princess went a-maying, the arch-magician set on his ogres to attack her knights; and when all the knights were slain, he spirited her away to his castle to be a prisoner there until her father should consent to her marriage to this wicked man, making him the heir to the kingdom.

“Now this was a castle made and upheld by magic. It was of the purest crystal, all sharp edges and points like spears. A keen-eyed man from a distance might see into the very heart of it and see the princess in her prison chamber, praying on her knees for deliverance. And there were a hundred doors and gates all around the castle, to go in and out.

“But this crystal castle was built upon a high rock, and all the way around that rock was a wide chasm; and this chasm had no bottom, so that any who fell into it would fall until the end of time.

“And when Abombalbab came and looked upon the castle, behold, a single bridge spanned the chasm. This was a bridge of glass, sparkling and intricately wrought, and so delicate that it would shatter at the lightest touch.”

This was the story that Ellayne was reading to Jack and Enith on the back porch on a rainy day, when her father came out through the kitchen door and interrupted it.

“Ellayne,” said Baron Roshay Bault, “your mother and I want to have a talk with you. Put the book down and come with me.”

He didn't say “please,” so of course Ellayne wondered, “Now what have I done?” She couldn't think of anything. Even so, it sounded like a serious matter. You could tell that from the expressions on Jack's and Enith's faces.

“Just Ellayne,” the baron said. He looked at Jack. “It'll be your turn later,” he said; and Jack thought that maybe he saw the hint of a twinkle in the baron's eye, but wasn't sure. The baron and baroness had formally adopted him some months ago.

Ellayne put a leather marker in the book and closed it carefully. It was a big book; it had been the baron's when he was a boy and had to be handled with care. “Don't peek,” she said. “You'll spoil the story.” And she got up and followed her father into the house.

“It sounds like she's in trouble,” Enith said. She lived next door with her grandmother and her aunt, who both worked for the baroness, and her grandmother's husband, who had a shipping business. “I wish I knew what it was!”

“It's a break from this foolishness about magic, at least,” Jack said, and he and Enith drifted into an argument about the story.

Baroness Vannett was waiting for them in the parlor. She smiled at her daughter.

“Sit down here by me, Ellayne,” she said. She didn’t seem angry. With only a little bit of trepidation, Ellayne joined her on the couch.

“We have to make a decision about your future,” Mother said. Ellayne didn’t like the sound of that. “As you know, it was always my wish to send you to finishing school in Obann to learn how to be a lady: to learn how to wear nice clothes properly, and how to dance, and how to behave in gentle and refined company.”

“Oh, no!” thought Ellayne. Her stomach crawled.

“But a few things have changed, haven’t they?” said Father. “The city of Obann isn’t what it was—Temple destroyed, palace gone—and there’s no more Oligarchy.”

“Which means your father will never become an oligarch,” Vannett said. “He’ll have to settle for being the Baron of the Eastern Marches, by appointment of the king. That’s better than being an oligarch.”

“And you’ve changed, too, my girl,” said Roshay Bault. “You don’t want to go to finishing school, do you?”

Ellayne shook her head, vigorously. She didn’t dare speak.

“Yes, many things have changed,” Vannett said. “I’m hardly the same person I used to be, if it comes to that. At any rate, we’ve decided not to send you to finishing school. We’re both sure you would hate to go, and trying to turn you into a nice, decorative lady would simply be a waste of good material. We love you as you are.”

“Which is not to say you’ll be allowed to dawdle away the rest of your life,” Roshay said. He sighed. “It’s all your brothers can do just to keep the family lumber business going. Josek and Dib are solid young men, and we’re very proud of them. But I need someone to help me in my work as baron. There’s so much to do! Much more than I can hope to do myself. I have to inspect the river patrols this week, which means I won’t be here to read and answer messages. And there are always so many messages! It isn’t always easy to pick out the important ones.”

“What your father means to say, Ellayne, is that if you’re willing to help him in his work, he’ll be more than glad to have you. There’ll be plenty for you to do here at home, without your going off to the city to learn how to flirt.”

“You’re getting to an age when you can’t just be a child anymore,” the baron said. “I think you passed that age when you went off to climb Bell Mountain—you and Jack both. There’s a lot I’ll have to teach you, but only if you want to learn. Do you?”

Ellayne opened her mouth, but it took a moment for any words to come out. “Do you mean it?” she cried. Her father was not above having a little joke from time to time.

He laughed, knowing exactly what she was thinking. “Of course I mean it!” he said. “It’ll be to my great gain, after all. You’ve already seen more of the world than I ever will and done things that I never would’ve dreamed of doing—and gotten out of scrapes that I don’t even want to think about.”

“And besides,” Vannett said, “you have God’s blessing on you. You have done Him mighty service—you and Jack, and Martis, too.”

“As you grow up, and as he grows up, too, King Ryons will need your help,” Father said. “You and Jack both. I’ll be an old man by then. The king will need your wits and your pluck. You’re as brave as any warrior in his army, but as your mother has said, you have God’s blessing on you. Fine ladies can be had for the asking, but wise and faithful servants to a king can hardly be had at any price.”

“The choice is yours, Ellayne,” said Mother. By way of answer, Ellayne hugged her as hard as she could.

“You might want to let your mother breathe, Ellayne,” said Roshay Bault.

Martis was riding back from a visit to the mountains with an urgent report to make.

On the other side of the mountains, the Abnaks’ revolt against the Thunder King had drawn the whole wrath of his empire down upon their heads. His armies swarmed around the skirts of the mountains, merciless, slaying, burning. Family by family, clan by clan, the Abnaks were being forced across the mountains. It was the only way they could save their wives and children. They retreated into Obannese territory, sparsely settled, but those who lived there knew King Thunder’s hordes would someday follow the Abnaks into Obann.

“A nice mess for the baron!” Martis thought.

The information he brought was vital, and so he rode hard, following the roads that paralleled the great Imperial River, the lifeline of Obann. His wiry Wallekki horse, Dulayl, kept up the pace all day long.

As vital as it was to gather accurate information for the baron—only a fool would believe the rumors that trickled down from many miles away—Martis could never leave the baron’s town of Ninneburky without some second thoughts. He’d sworn an oath to defend Jack and Ellayne with his life, and it made him anxious to be away from them. He would never forget how his former master, Lord Reesh, the First Prester, had sent him out to kill the children rather than let them ring the bell atop Bell Mountain. Lord Reesh was dead, but Martis thought there must be servants of his still at large, who would sell the children to the Thunder King. As safe as they

might seem to be in the baron's house in Ninneburky, Martis knew that that was only seeming. His place was with them; it was why God had spared his life on the summit of Bell Mountain. Martis had gone up the mountain with a brown beard and come down with a white one. It was not an easy sign to ignore.

But the Abnaks couldn't be ignored, either. For a thousand years their raiding parties had stolen into Obann in search of slaves, furs, and scalps. The slaves they sold to the Wallekki; the furs they kept for themselves; and the scalps they took were the takers' pride and joy. There could soon be trouble on Obann's side of the mountains.

Trouble might have started already, if not for some scattered communities of Abnaks mixed with Obannese—persons who had come together because both were oppressed by the Thunder King while he controlled the Golden Pass and built a road down to the lowlands. Rebel Abnaks and runaway Obannese slaves had merged into a new people, living together and intermarrying. Here the Word of God had filtered into the wilderness, bringing hope where no hope was.

But the peace wouldn't last, Martis thought, unless something could be done to foil the Thunder King—if anything could be done against so great a power.

“Faster, Dulay!” he spoke to his horse. “Faster!”



“So what was that all about?” Jack asked, when Ellayne came back out to the porch.

“You'll find out soon,” she said. “They want you now, in the parlor.”

“But what is it?” Enith cried.

“It's something I want to think about for a while. I have to take it all in.”

“Ellayne!”

“I'm going to my room now,” Ellayne said. She picked up her book and went back into the house.

“Well, I like that!” Enith said. “She didn't even say how Abombalbab got over the glass bridge, either.”

“Oh, on a flying horse or something just as silly. I've got to go.”

He left Enith fuming on the porch. When neither of them came back outside, after a time she went into the kitchen to help her aunt prepare the supper. Aunt Lanora often spoke of things that weren't rightly her business, but today she hadn't managed to overhear anything that Enith wanted to know.

She'd never known anyone like Jack and Ellayne for keeping secrets. Enith had been trying for months to pry those secrets out of them. "They'll see," she thought. "They'll see they can't keep their secrets forever."

CHAPTER 2

Jandra and the Book

Many miles away in Lintum Forest, where King Ryons had his throne, another child, a girl much younger than Ellayne, had her head bent over a book. This was a big book that belonged to Obst, a book of all the Scriptures in a single volume. For uncounted years it had sat unopened and unread in a book room in the Temple in the city of Obann. Obst had taken it with him when he had left the Temple to be a hermit in the forest. He'd been a young man then.

The book lay spread out on a wooden table, where the king, under Obst's guidance, had been studying it an hour earlier. The little fair-haired girl, herself not much bigger than the book, sat on the tabletop with her lips moving as she read the words. Behind her towered the ruined pile of stone that was Carbonek Castle, now the seat of Ryons' kingdom.

Here Ryons came to learn the Scriptures when the weather was nice. He came back today to play with the little girl, who loved him; Jandra was her name. Being king and having so much to learn, he had few idle hours. The Ghols of his bodyguard taught him horsemanship and archery and the fine art of knife-throwing. Helki taught him woodcraft. The other chieftains in his army, men of a dozen different Heathen lands, taught him the ways and customs of their nations. When it seemed his head would burst for all the teaching they were trying to cram into it, Helki would send him into the woods with only his hound and his hawk for company—and the horse-sized killer bird, Baby, to protect him. "Learn to love the forest, Your Majesty, and the forest will love you back," was Helki's teaching. "Every plant, every animal, every bird has something to tell you, if you can learn how to listen."

King Ryons stood beside Jandra, watching with astonishment as she read the words that so often tripped him up. She didn't seem to know he was there. When he spoke to her, she didn't answer.

"It can't be!" he said to himself.

He leaped onto a second table and waved to a woman passing by, not willing to raise his voice. She saw him and came at a run.

"Your Majesty?"

"Please—go find Obst and send him here. Hurry!" Ryons said. "And Gurun and Abgayle, too."

The woman curtsied and sped off. There were not yet so many people settled around Carbonek that anyone lacked a chance to speak with the king. In the little time it took her to come back with Obst, a small crowd had gathered around the king and Jandra, but no one made a sound.

"My lord, what's the matter?" Obst started to say, but Ryons cut him off.

"Shh! Listen!"

Jandra read in a voice much deeper than any little girl's: "The nations bow themselves before idols of wood and stone, the work of their own hands. They bow down to trees, to birds and beasts and creeping things, the work of My hands; but they know not Me. They walk on My earth and eat My fruits and meat; I send the rain that makes their crops to thrive. They have no understanding.

"But to you, My people, I have spoken, to you have I revealed Myself. But you have shut your eyes to Me, and shut your ears, and closed your minds, and hardened your hearts. You have yourselves become like wood and stone. But I shall visit you, and you shall know that I am God: there is no other."

Jandra's head drooped, and she fell asleep on top of the open book.

Obst gnawed on his beard. "Prophet Ika," he muttered, "fifth fascicle, verses fifteen and sixteen."

"She reads better than I can," said Ryons, "and you've been teaching me for all this time."

Abgayle came and gathered Jandra into her arms. Since Helki had found the child wandering alone on the plains and had brought her to the forest, Abgayle had served as Jandra's mother.

"Abgayle, have you been teaching Jandra how to read?" Obst asked.

She laughed. "How pretty she is!" Ryons thought. "Helki ought to marry her."

"Me, Obst?" she said. "But I don't know how to read."

"Maybe it's Gurun who taught her," Ryons said.

But when Gurun joined them, she said, "No, my lords, I haven't taught her anything. It is hard for me to read the Obannese lettering." Gurun knew the Scriptures better than anyone but Obst, but she was not Obannese. She came from Fogo Island in the distant north, blown to Obann by a storm, which she accepted as God's providence. Everyone here called her a queen, which embarrassed her. She loved Ryons, but he was just a boy, much too young to have her or anyone else for a queen. At home she would have been married by now, but island girls married young. The Obannese calendar was different, so Gurun had lost track of her birthday. She was at least seventeen, she reckoned. Ryons always looked at her with admiration—tall and straight, with bright blue eyes and shining golden hair. She deserved to be a queen, he thought.

"If Jandra reads the Scriptures, and no one here has taught her," Gurun said, "then it can only be the gift of God."

Onlookers exchanged perplexed glances, but Obst nodded. "That's my thought, too," he said. Obst had seen God take a boy from Heathen slavery and make him king of Obann; He could certainly make a little girl to read. It was Jandra who had first announced God's choice of Ryons as king, and everyone recognized her as a prophetess. Since King Ozias' bell had rung from the

summit of Bell Mountain, many marvelous things had happened in the world—not all of them pleasant.

It was a busy time at Carbonek. It was God’s will that they should carry His word into Heathen lands, and the chiefs of the army were preparing their campaign. They would have to get across the mountains before the end of summer. But where should they cross, and how would they supply themselves?

“Wherever we cross, we’ll have plenty of fighting,” said Shaffur, chief of the Wallekki. His riders had been scouting far and wide. “Maybe more than we can handle, I think.”

The First Prester was on his way to Lintum Forest to bless the king and his army, but no one knew where Helki was. He’d gone off with three of his best woodsmen to find a way across the mountains and hadn’t been heard from for two weeks. “Let the chieftains get things organized,” he’d said. “I’m no good at that.”

Chief Buzzard wanted the army to cross into Abnak lands and help his people in their revolt against the Thunder King. “We’ll have all the Abnaks fighting on our side,” he said. “We’ll take many scalps.”

Obst hardly thought that the best way to export God’s word, but he couldn’t deny the army’s need for allies.

“We should wait for God to speak to us,” said the Fazzan chieftain, Zekelesh. “What’s the use of having a prophetess among us, if we aren’t going to listen to her?”

And now the prophetess had spoken—a little girl who couldn’t read, reading from the Scriptures. And no one understood the message.

Along with Gurun and the old Abnak subchief, Uduqu, a boy named Fnaa had escaped from the city of Obann upon the destruction of the Palace last summer. Now he spent much of his time with King Ryons, playing and exploring the forest together. Both had Heathen blood in them. Both had been born slaves. But that wasn’t all they had in common.

Fnaa was the king’s double, and you could hardly tell the two of them apart—two dark-haired, dark-eyed boys, slightly undergrown. But Ryons had a red streak in his hair, a sign of his descent from King Ozias. If you covered it with charcoal, the boys were practically identical.

By the time Ryons and Fnaa got together at the supper table, the whole settlement buzzed with word of Jandra’s reading. Fnaa was sorry he’d missed it.

“I did see the whole Palace go up in flames,” he said, “and that ought to count as a miracle. But for Jandra to read that great big book—why, I can hardly lift it!”

“Abgayle has a little book of stories someone gave her, but she says Jandra can’t read that.” Ryons shook his head. “I wish Helki was here.”

“What for? He can’t read, either! He’s out hunting bandits somewhere—unless they’re hunting him.”

“I don’t like to think about it,” Ryons said. When he was a slave, nothing ever worried him as long as he had enough to eat and escaped beating. Now he was a king, and many things worried him. “I don’t know how we’d ever get along without Helki.”

“Oh, he’ll be all right,” said Fnaa. “My mother always prays for him.”