

THE GREEN EMBER



S. D. Smith
Illustrated by Zach Franzen

THE GREEN EMBER

THE GREEN EMBER

S. D. Smith

Illustrated by Zach Franzen



Story Warren Books

Copyright © 2015 by S. D. Smith

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the publisher, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical reviews and certain other noncommercial uses permitted by copyright law. This book is about, not for, rabbits. Silly reader, books are for kids. For permission requests, write to the publisher, addressed "Attention: Permissions Coordinator," at info@brightenerbooks.com.

Trade Paperback edition ISBN: 978-0-9862235-0-1

Hardcover Edition ISBN: 978-0-9862235-1-8

Also available in eBook and Audiobook

Story Warren Books,
an imprint of
Brightener Books
www.brightenerbooks.com

Cover and interior illustrations by Zach Franzen, www.atozach.com

Cover design by Paul Boekell, www.boekell.com

Map created by Will Smith

Printed in the United States of America.

16 17 18 19 20 05 06 07 08 09

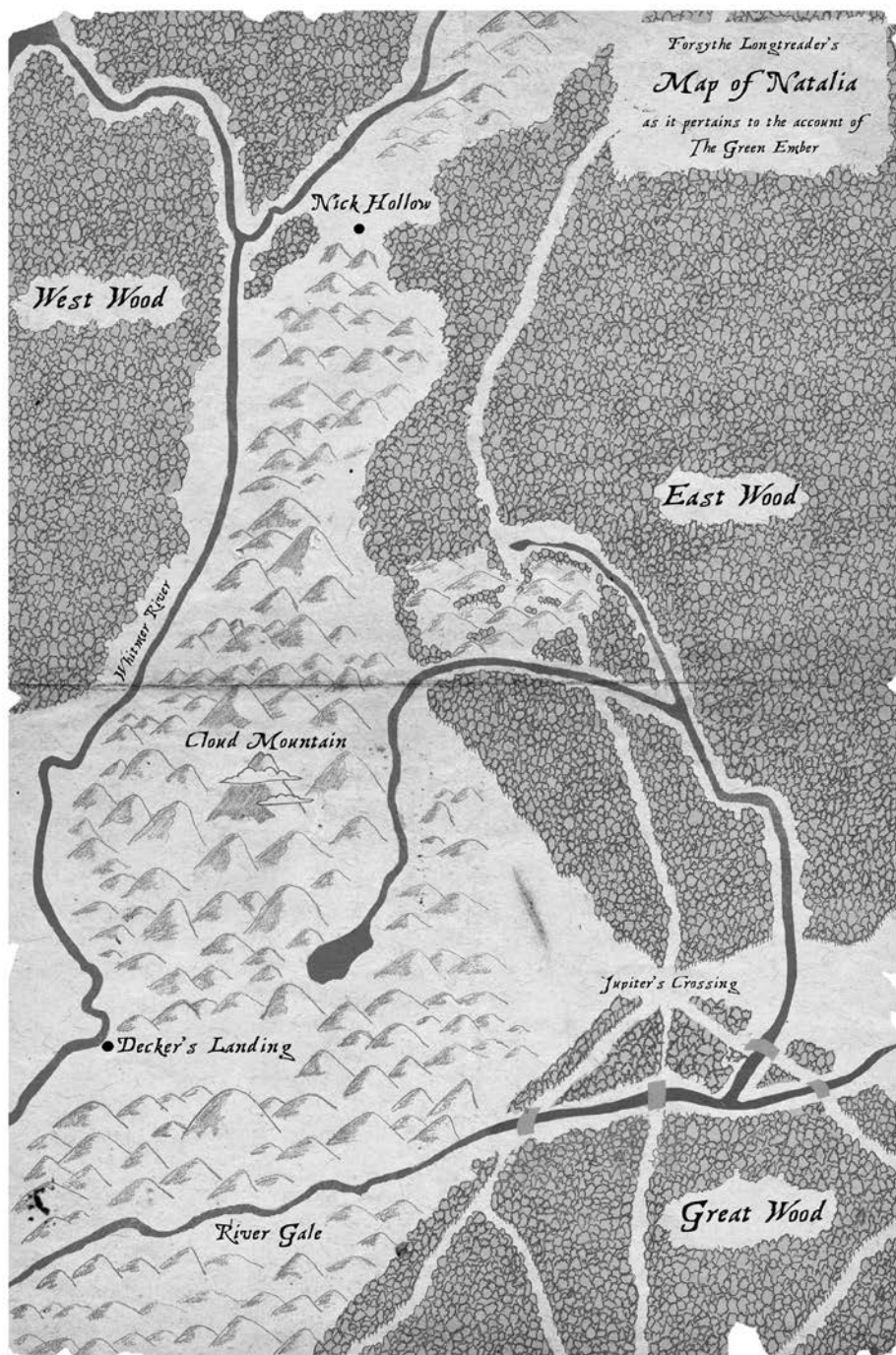


Story Warren Books
www.storywarren.com

For Anne and Josiah
Quaerite primum regnum Dei

Forzythe Longreader's
Map of Natalia

as it pertains to the account of
The Green Ember



PROLOGUE

Two soaked and battered rabbits washed up on the shore of Ayman Lake. Gasping, Fleck crawled onto the stony beach, rolled over, and tried to clear his mind. Galt was already standing. “We have to go, Fleck,” he said, eyes darting from the lake to the tree line.

“I’m no traitor,” Fleck managed to say through ragged breaths.

“Traitor?” Galt cried. “The winning side gets to decide who the traitors were. We’ve lost, Fleck. It’s over. Even you, Captain Blackstar, can do nothing this time. We have no chance.”

“We? *We* have no chance?”

“*He* has no chance,” Galt said, head down, edging toward the forest.

Fleck stood slowly, staggering. The usually grey fur of his arm was blotched with dark scarlet. One eye was swollen shut.

THE GREEN EMBER



“He can be saved,” Fleck said, reaching for his sword. His hand closed on air. His scabbard was empty.

“Nothing,” Galt said. “There’s nothing we can do. It’s the end of the world.”

“But the oath, Galt. Remember? We can still turn this. King Whitson needs us. Prince Lander needs us,” he said, pointing to the burning ship. “I’ll never turn traitor.”

“You’re only a traitor if you betray yourself,” Galt said. He sprinted off, disappearing into the trees.

Fleck struggled to stay upright. Swaying, he turned from the fleeing rabbit to face the lake. Charcoal smoke corkscrewed into the sky. The blackened boat teemed with enemies. Flames snapped at the red diamond standard as the last kingsbucks grappled with the invaders on the deck. Whitson Mariner stood among them, his sword poised and

PROLOGUE

his harried shouts echoing over the lake. Fleck straightened and stretched his arm. Pain flared. Unbearable agony. He bent, wincing. He opened his eyes and saw King Whitson, fighting desperately to protect Prince Lander. Fleck rose, ignoring the pain, and shouted across the water.

“My place beside you, my blood for yours! Till the Green Ember rises, or the end of the world!”

Swordless, Fleck Blackstar hobbled to the water’s edge and plunged in.

from *The Black Star of Kingston*



Chapter One

HEATHER AND PICKET CATCH A STAR

Heather had invented the game, but Picket made it magic. She remembered the day it began. She had been out in the meadow behind their elm-tree home, lying on a blanket in the sun. Heather was little then. Her long furry ears bent slightly in the wind, and the bow she invariably wore over one ear was starting to come undone. That day Mother had done a carnation bow, an intricate weave of one long ribbon made to look like a large flower, and pinned it to one ear. Picket was little more than a baby then, sleeping in his crib.

Heather had gathered several sticks and was thinking hard about them when a powerful gust of wind almost knocked her over. The gust finally loosened her bow, which came down in a tangle of scarlet ribbon, draping over the sticks she held. She was unaware that she held the ingredients for a game that would later give them endless hours of fun.

She had crossed two short sticks and made an X shape. Then she added another, giving it six points. She tied them together with the long scarlet ribbon. Heather smiled. It

THE GREEN EMBER

was pretty, like a star. The end of the ribbon trailed back a few feet, and she considered wrapping all of it around the bound pointed sticks. But she stopped suddenly, and then the wind picked up again as she tied off the ribbon around the star at its center, leaving its long scarlet train to flap in the breeze. She stood, holding her small invention aloft, smiling wide. With barely a thought of why, she flung the toy as hard as she could. It sailed through the air like a shooting star, the ribbon trailing a scarlet wake. It disappeared into the tall grass. She frowned, afraid it would take forever to find it.

That's when the game came to her. When Picket woke up, she explained it to him, hoping he would crawl out and play. But he was too little then.

"It's called Starseek," she said, "and this is the star."

"Is it a real star?" Picket asked, his head cocked sideways and his whiskers twitching.

"No, little one," Heather said, "a real star hangs in the sky at night, along with a million others. This is just a game."

"A game?" Picket said. "Maybe they're all for games."

Now that they were both older, Heather near maturity and Picket not too far behind, the two of them had played Starseek hundreds of times. It had been fun to play alone for a little while, but that got old pretty quickly. So Picket had played, with Heather's patient instruction, from the time he could walk. Now he was older and, as much as Heather hated to admit it, getting as good as her at the game she had invented. He had a keen eye and was agile on the ground.

HEATHER AND PICKET CATCH A STAR

She was faster. She could still beat him at a straight-run race, but he was quick.

Today she was in danger of losing every match. But it wasn't over yet.

Picket flung the star, and it sailed, red ribbon against blue sky, far into the meadow. Finally falling, it disappeared into the tall golden grass. The moment it touched down, they were off.

Picket darted back and forth amid the tall grass. He had an uncanny knack for doing a sort of quick math in his mind, and his estimations were almost always spot-on. He liked to stay low, close to the ground. But Heather's chance lay in her experience and flat-out speed.

She bolted for the spot she was sure the star must be, running full-out, heedless of the hidden dangers that might send her sprawling. Let Picket dart back and forth all he wanted, dodging roots and stumps. She would fly.

Heather sailed over the high grass in each leap, rebounding to soar once more above the heavy kernelled tips. She loved the feeling of the wind pushing against the fur of her face and her long soft ears. She was marveling at the power in her legs and feet, thrilled with the feel of the wind against her face, when she struck a stone, well-hidden in the thickest part of the grass. She lost her balance and fell hard, rolling several times. *Surely it's over now.*

Heather popped up quickly and stretched her long neck to look around. She ignored the pain in her leg; she could tell it wasn't serious enough to stop. She saw grass giving

THE GREEN EMBER

way in a zigzag to her left and knew Picket was closing in on the star. She quickly scanned the grass ahead, hoping to catch any evidence of the star's entry.

She saw it before he did, but he was closer, tacking back and forth. He stopped and popped his head up, trying to peer above the tall grass. He saw it and quickly swiveled to see where Heather was.

By then, she was already pounding toward the target.

Just the delay I need.

Heather never stopped, but their eyes met. She saw Picket's eyes narrow, his whiskers twitch, and his brows furrow. He launched into the effort.



HEATHER AND PICKET CATCH A STAR

It was going to be close.

He led 2 to 0, and if he got the star this time, the match was over. Heather put all her energy into the last few feet, determined to snatch victory away from this young upstart. She smiled.

Picket was closing fast, she saw, faster than she expected. She watched him coil for the final spring at the star. He lunged for it, propelled through the air like a skipping stone rising from the dimpled surface of a lake. His hand opened to grab the star.

Heather's hand closed on it a moment sooner. They collided in the air, rolling over and over in a blurry heap of fur and red ribbon.

Heather bounced up first, her fist clenching the star.

Picket rubbed his head and leaned on his elbow. "That," he began, pausing to catch his breath, "was amazing."

"It was," Heather agreed, panting and trying not to giggle. "Closest finish ever, Picket."

"Yeah," he agreed, gasping for air and grinning wide. "That was even closer than the infamous Snow Match of last winter."

She laughed, remembering. That had been a cold, crazy day.

But this day was fine. There was no snow, no chill, nothing whatsoever to dampen their joy. At least, not yet.

Heather glanced at the sky over East Wood. Purple clouds pulsed with irregular stabs of light in the distance. A rolling rumble signaled the storm's approach. Pretty fast

THE GREEN EMBER

approach, if she knew anything. She looked away. After all, it was still sunny here, at least for the moment.

“Great match, Heather,” Picket said, rising to his feet. “You were going faster than I’ve ever seen you.”

“Thanks,” she said. “But you still have the lead.”

“Let it fly,” he said, eager for a chance to win the overall match.

She leaned into it, her heart still racing, and flung the star with all her strength. It took flight, sailing high into the sky, its red trail rippling in the wind. The game depended on each player throwing it as hard as he or she could and both standing still until it landed.

The rabbits watched, eyes tracking the red ribbon, while their bodies prepared to bolt as soon as it disappeared in the grass. As soon as it landed.

But it didn’t land.

The breeze caught it up, and it sailed wide to their right and stuck high in the branches of the old maple tree that bent on the edge of East Wood.

“I can’t believe this,” Picket said, kicking a stone. Thunder boomed in the distance.

“Let’s go see if we can get it,” Heather said.

Picket frowned but followed behind his sister.

They weren’t allowed to go past this tree to the east. They could go into West Wood, sure. But Father had strictly warned them never to go past this maple tree, never to come a step closer to East Wood. He had also told them to run full speed back to the house if they ever heard anything

HEATHER AND PICKET CATCH A STAR

whatsoever from the eastern forest, even as small as a twig snapping. So, on top of their game being delayed or ruined, they had to go near the creepiest place they knew.

They crossed to the meadow's edge quickly, an eye on the approaching storm. Heather looked up at the tangled mess of the maple tree. Its limbs stretched out like the brittle arms of a lanky monster; its hollow middle was a crevice of decay.

It was a young tree, nowhere near as big as the wide elm the rabbits made their home in. But the monster maple was dying. This seemed wrong to Heather, but Father had confirmed it.

"Yes, it's a very young tree. But it won't last two more winters. It's doomed," he had said while walking with them last year in the spring, "just like everything in the east. It used to be alive and beautiful. But now it's bent, dangerous, and dying."

Heather had felt a chill as he said this, a rare display of sadness by their father. But, come to think of it, Heather thought she could see this more and more in him. Was Father getting sadder, or was she just getting old enough to see it? She hadn't asked him then, or since, the questions that continued to bubble up in her mind: *Where are we from? Why did we come here?*

She knew that Father was from the east and that none of Mother's family still lived in Nick Hollow. But any time the subject of their moving to Nick Hollow—far away from almost everyone—came up, her parents grew sad, grave, and silent. She had learned to leave those questions unasked.

THE GREEN EMBER

They reached the roots of the maple tree and stared up at the tangle of ribbon that surrounded their star.

"We could make another," Picket said, looking from side to side.

Heather knew why he was nervous.

"That ribbon isn't so easy to find, Picket," she said. "We can get it if we work together."

"You know I'm scared of heights," he said. "There's no point in teasing me."

"I'm not teasing you," Heather said, snapping back. "I just think you need to get over it. We're not that far away from being old enough to be on our own, Pick."

"I'm sorry I can't be as grown-up and brave as Heather the Magnificent," he said.

"Let me boost you up," she said, fighting off the urge to really sting him with her words. She cast an uneasy eye at the forest, which lay just a few yards away down a gentle slope. She found a good spot and folded her hands together, making a place for Picket's foot to step up and reach the lowest limb. From there, she knew, he should be able to reach the next limb and climb up carefully to reach the star.

She watched him hesitate, first glancing at the wood with a wince, then looking up fearfully at where the star was stuck in the branches. Beyond the branches, the blue sky was turning to purple as charcoal clouds churned above.

Heather could tell that he was embarrassed, that he was fighting off the urge to run away. She felt nervous as well.

HEATHER AND PICKET CATCH A STAR

This lanky monster of a tree had their star in its heights, and it looked determined to trap them in its branches.

The sky thundered suddenly, an ominous, brooding doom. Heather felt panic growing inside her. "It's nothing," she said aloud. "I'm not afraid of this—" But she couldn't finish her defiant words.

A bone-rattling boom ripped open the sky, sending a jagged javelin of gold crackling down.

The rabbits were knocked back as lightning struck the maple with a deafening crack, followed by a spray of sparks and shards of bark. Lightning ripped through the limbs, circling the brittle trunk of the maple in a braided tangle of fire.

Heather got to her feet, dazed. Her vision cleared. She looked up.

A huge limb, one of the monster maple's bending arms— heavy and ablaze—cracked off and hurtled toward them. She stole a panicked glance at Picket.

Picket was on his back, eyes closed.

He wasn't moving.



Chapter Two

HOME IN THE HOLLOW

As the burning limb descended, Heather sprang. She dove onto her brother, gripping him tightly and rolling them both down the sloping grass, away from the blazing maple's limb. The singed fingers of the outmost branches pawed at them as the monster maple's arm smashed into the ground in time with another thunderous boom from the sky.

They rolled into a thorn bush on the edge of East Wood as the rain began to fall. Like the blazing branch they had only just escaped, the rain came down suddenly, with no pitter-patter of polite introduction. Lightning split the sky again, this time a little farther off. Picket woke, eyes wide, and gasping for breath.

"It's okay, Picket," Heather said in a rush, loud above the noise. "You're all right."

Heather checked him over quickly to confirm her words. For a moment they sat there, staring dumbly at the burning tree, smoke twisting up into the sky as the rain extinguished the blaze from the top down. After another boom of thunder and a crackling flash, they ran for it.

THE GREEN EMBER

Even though it was the middle of the afternoon, it was hard to see. With the storm's arrival, a frightening darkness out of the east had descended. The two rabbits ran, hand in hand, slipping and tripping in the driving rain. They were shadows of what they had been only a short time ago when they had crossed the meadow like comets chasing after a star. They were shaken and afraid.

They had the whole of the wide meadow to cross in the darkness, soaked and fearful, but in flashes of lightning they could see their elm-tree home.

Flash! Father and Mother appeared on the little porch between the wide, smooth roots of the tree. *Flash!* Mother was holding Baby Jacks, her face showing worry. Father peered into the darkness.

"Here!" Heather shouted. *Flash!* Picket shouted too, but their voices sounded small in the pounding rain and irregular claps of thunder.

Flash! Mother pointed. *Rumble ... flash!* Father dashed into the storm. The younger rabbits ducked as the sky was split and lightning fell. Heather saw Father in the bright bursts, never ducking, always moving toward them in the darkness. Eager. Determined. Confident.

He met them halfway across the meadow. Father paused before them, and they stopped. He looked from Picket to Heather and, after a moment's hesitation, put his arm around Heather and motioned for them to follow him back. Heather thought he had almost meant to pick her up, to fold her in his arms and carry her home. But he seemed startled,

HOME IN THE HOLLOW

or half-embarrassed, that she wasn't really small enough to carry like that anymore. Nor was Picket, who was almost her size now.

Nearly to the porch, Father glanced down at her. She smiled up at him.

Finally, they were on the porch and through the door. Baby Jacks cried in the corner, while Mother met them with blankets, towels, and hugs.

"What a fright you've had," she said, unable to keep from making the pleasant chattering nonsense sounds she used to comfort Baby Jacks.

Heather received a blanket gratefully, felt it wrap around her, and sat down at the table along with Picket. Father hugged them each and then hurried across to the stove and built a hasty fire. He returned and took up Baby Jacks, who stopped crying when Father rocked him. Father grabbed the poker, still rocking Jacks, and poked at the fire. Heather watched him toss another log in, and it sputtered to life.

"You're soaked!" Mother said to Father, "And you're getting little Jacket wet now too."

"We're all in this together," he said, shaking his head so that water sprayed at her. She laughed, grabbed the kettle, and set it to boil above the fire.

"Now, both of you come sit by the fire, and I'll bring you some dry clothes," Mother said. Heather smiled. She was already feeling easier, safe within the walls of their elm-hollow home. She and Picket crossed the floor, dodging Father, who

THE GREEN EMBER

was trying to retrieve his glasses from Baby Jacks without breaking them or hurting him.

"All right, Jacket, son, please ... not my spectacles," he said as Jacks cackled mischievously.

"Spectacles," Picket said, laughing and taking Jacks into his arms. "Why do you call them 'spectacles'?"

"That's how most of them talk in the east, where your fancy father is from," Mother called. "They sound awfully sophisticated and clever out that way. Not like us perfectly ordinary people raised in Nick Hollow."

Picket laughed and tickled Jacks. Mother often teased Father gently about his prim way of speaking. Picket sat on the hearth, Jacks in his lap, his back to the growing blaze. Heather poked at the fire, and it brightened. Picket smiled, and Jacks scrunched his shoulders in delight at the wave of heat.

Heather watched her brothers happily. "Why won't Jacks sit with me like that?"

"We have a brotherly bond," Picket said, "based on mutual promises of protection. I will always be there for Jacks, and he will always be there for me. Right, Jacks?" Jacks smiled up at Picket. He was never more relaxed than when Picket held him.

Heather frowned. "Where was Jacks today when that burning limb was falling on you and you were out cold?" she teased. She had meant it to be funny, but Picket looked down, then into the fire.

"I'm sorry, Picket," she said. "I was teasing. I didn't mean

HOME IN THE HOLLOW

anything by it.”

“I can’t believe I fainted,” Picket said, shaking his head.

“Never worry, my lad,” Father said. “It’s a weakness of our kind. Rabbits often faint before we even can think about it. And then we take a long time to recover. It’s just a weakness.”

“I don’t want to be weak,” Picket whispered. He looked into his baby brother’s eyes. “I’ll never let you down, Jacks. I’ll be strong for you.”

Heather frowned. It was sweet, yes, but when Picket talked like that, something twisted in her stomach.

Soon the kettle was boiling, they were in fresh, dry clothes, and they all sat around the fire, at ease as the storm raged outside. Mother poured tea while Father tried to fix his glasses.

Mother brought them each a raisin cake, and Father, setting down his glasses in surrender, began to fill his pipe. Heather loved the smell of Father’s pipe. When he blew smoke rings, she had always thought of it as magic.

“Mother can fix your glasses, or, your spectacular spectacles,” Heather said primly. “Why don’t you tell us a story?”

“Yeah,” Picket said, perking up. “Goofhack the Blabber and the Tattler’s Dungeon”? Jacks and I vote for Goofhack.”

Heather frowned at him and Father noticed.

“Perhaps something a little more grown-up for my adventurous children,” Father said, cocking an eyebrow at Heather. She smiled, then panicked.

Did he want her to tell a story? *Oh, no.* She wasn’t ready. She needed time. She could never tell one like Father told them.

THE GREEN EMBER

“Heather?” Father asked. “Would you like to tell us a little tale?”

She looked down, blushed, coughed, and stammered. “Well, I don’t know.” She did know. *Not now. Not yet.* “Maybe next time?”

Father looked at her with a hint of disappointment and seemed about to say something; then he just looked into the fire. After a while, he spoke.

“Heather, I think you are very brave. What you did today, out there in the storm, took courage. All of life is a battle against fear. We fight it on one front, and it sneaks around to our flank.” He paused, looked kindly at her.

“Yes, Father. I understand.”

“I regret many things I’ve done,” he said, “but most of all I regret those moments when I said to Fear, ‘You are my master.’” He suddenly looked terribly sad.

“What is it, Father?” Picket asked as Mother tenderly took Jacks from him.

“It’s only that, when you’re older, you hand out wisdom to your children like you know everything, but it is sometimes hard to follow your own advice.”

“I don’t think you’re afraid of anything,” Picket said. “You wouldn’t ever faint.”

“Well,” Father said, looking down, “I’m sorry to say that’s not true. I’m not proud of everything I’ve done, son.”

Mother’s soothing noises could be heard from across the room where she quieted Baby Jacks for bed.

“What about that story, Father?” Heather said. “A story

HOME IN THE HOLLOW

about bravery?”

“A story to make us brave,” Father said, nodding and laying down his damaged glasses. He rubbed his eyes, cast a glance at Mother, then stared into the fire.

Heather and Picket exchanged quick glances. This felt different than their father’s usual fireside tales.

“How about if I tell you a true story?” Father said, still staring into the fire as if searching for the thread of the tale inside the bobbing, jagged edges of the flames.

Mother came to stand beside Father, Baby Jacks asleep in her arms. Father looked up at her, and a knowing look passed between them. Heather had seen this many times, how they spoke without words. Father’s eyes asked a question. Mother nodded, smiling sadly. She sat down in the rocking chair and hummed the beginning of a sad melody. Well, Heather thought, the melody was something more than sad, but not less than sad. She tried to find a word for it, but Father was talking again.

“All right, my dears,” Father said. “I will tell you of ‘The Rise and Fall of King Jupiter the Great.’”



Chapter Three

KING JUPITER

The weariness vanished from Father as he closed his eyes, focusing on the tale. He smiled as if the memory of the story was sweet. There was a long, silent pause. Just when Heather and Picket began to wonder if he would ever speak again, he started.

“Long ago in The Great Wood there lived a rabbit king named Walter. You have heard many tales of Whitson Mariner and the First Trekkers. I have told you of the escape from Golden Coast, the calamitous sea passage, the discovery of Natalia, and the battle of Ayman Lake. You know of King Whitson, of brave Seddle, of loyal Captain Blackstar and the others of our first heroes. Over a hundred years separated King Walter from his famous ancestor Whitson Mariner, and a thousand tales lay between them. Many kings were born, lived, and died in Natalia. Some of them were good and some bad. King Walter was so well-loved that his small number of subjects called him the good king, or King Good. This name came to distinguish him from his father, a cruel lord who served himself all his days. King Good had not

THE GREEN EMBER

only goodness but also ambition. He tirelessly built back all that his father had lost, and more besides. He called his small kingdom the Thirty Warrens, though, in truth, there were only twelve when he came to the throne. But he aspired to build and create, to secure good for all those who would follow. Jupiter, his third son and heir, took all his father's vision into his heart. He was like his father, only—to King Good's delight—far more jolly and wise. Jupiter Goodson ascended to the throne when his aged father was killed by raiding hawks.

“By the time King Jupiter had been on the throne for five years, the Thirty Warrens—as the kingdom was still called—included nearly a hundred warrens and spanned almost the entirety of the Great Wood. He was a great lord, humble and happy. He sought justice and went to war to get it. He was magnificent in battle; the world had never before seen such a noble king—and never has since.” Heather noticed Mother looking sadly at Father, a tear streaking down her cheek.

Father went on. “He had a powerful army and great captains to lead it. One captain was Perkin One-Eye, perhaps King Jupiter's greatest friend and most valiant warrior. There was also Stam the Stout, Pickwand, Fesslehorn, and Harlen Seer, the Wizened Warrior. Nine great wars were fought over twenty years. They are all worthy of great tales. Of course King Jupiter was there in every battle, leading from the front, with a fierceness rarely ever known in rabbits.

KING JUPITER

“In the Red Valley War, King Jupiter came to the aid of a small collection of warrens under siege. They were threatened by a pack of wolves led by their wicked king, a ruthless wolf named Garlacks. King Jupiter swept the wolves from the Red Valley. He fought Garlacks himself, ending him in a spectacular battle as the red sun set. Oh, they sang songs of his victory for years! He was a wonder.”

Father paused to collect himself again. Heather and Picket waited, wise and silent, eager for more. Heather wondered why such a happy story could make Father so sad, but she didn't ask. Then she remembered that Father had called this tale “The Rise *and Fall* of King Jupiter the Great.”

Father went on. “He became known as the greatest fighting king of the age. It was his glory for a while but eventually began to trouble him. The laughter in him quieted, and he became graver. He believed he had always tried to achieve peace and was sad that he so often had to find it at the end of his sword.

“So King Jupiter the Great, Lord of the Thirty Warrens, bent all his energies to diplomacy, to avoiding any wars that could be prevented. Thanks to his many victories and his great army, he was successful. He forged historically unthinkable alliances with squirrels, the smaller birds, and most of the smaller animals of the forest. He became Sovereign of the Great Wood. He worked for peace in the forest, using his allied forces to rid the land of the most troublesome elements, including the fairly small number of birds of prey.

THE GREEN EMBER

All the awful raptors were banished back to their haunts in the High Bleaks, for the forest was vigilantly protected by the vaunted army of Jupiter Goodson.”

In the firelight, Heather watched Mother cross the room and lay Jacks in his crib. She stayed there for a while, watching him sleep, as Father went on.

“All the energy he had earlier given to war he put into gaining peace—and keeping it. As his army had great captains, so too he had a Council of Seven Ambassadors.” Here Father stopped again, walking to stand in front of the fire, as if a sudden chill had found him.

His back to the children, he went on. “These councilors served as his own voice in the far regions of the forest and beyond. One rabbit he called to be their chief: Garten Longtreader. He lived up to the great name of Longtreader, making countless journeys into the deeps of the forest on missions to make alliances for the king. It was he who was credited for much of the expansion of the rule of Jupiter Goodson. It was said that King Jupiter held the world together, but Longtreader was his thread. The king was happy and just,” Father said, his voice cracking, “ruling with wisdom and building the idyllic kingdom his father had dreamed of.

“When the Great Alliance was forged and the wars seemed a glorious memory, King Jupiter finally rested from his adventuring and married. His family grew and grew, and he was truly happy.” Father stopped again, closed his eyes, and rubbed his chin. Mother slowly crossed the room again, her head bowed.

KING JUPITER

“The king was asked during this time by a faithful subject, ‘What, Lord Jupiter, is the greatest joy in the peace you have won?’ He did not answer suddenly; that was not his way. He was a philosopher king, so he thought on it. Finally, after several moments in silence, he answered with a wide smile, ‘That I am my father’s true son.’” Father bent then, sobbing quietly, and Mother came to his side. She put her arms around him, eventually kissing his cheek and whispering in his ear. He nodded and laid his hand on her shoulder gently. “You are always right, my dear,” he said. “I couldn’t keep it from them any longer. Who knows what may ...” His voice trailed off.

Mother nodded. “I know.”

“I’m sorry for my tears, children. They are not all sad, but some are. It’s a story that ...” he began, but he could not finish.

“It’s lovely, Father,” Heather said into the quiet, her voice soft.

Father whispered thanks to her, then stood. “He was magnificent, children! I wish you could have seen him standing at the head of his forces in gleaming golden armor. Like the dawn, children! All who knew him loved him without reserve,” Father said, but he stopped, struggling to go on. Mother hung her head, and Father managed to say, “Well, I should say that *almost* everyone loved him loyally.”

“Father will tell you more another time,” Mother said, taking his arm. “For now, it’s time for sleep. It’s a happy thought that there could be such a king, isn’t it?”

THE GREEN EMBER

"It is, Mother," Heather said, her mind overflowing with questions and answers, gleaming armor and flashing swords. "It's too good to not be true."

* * *

A few minutes later, Heather and Picket lay quietly in their beds upstairs. Their father had whispered his blessings on them, and Heather could hear his footfalls as he descended the winding stairs.

Heather stared out the small window beyond Picket's bed at the bright white moon. The storm was over and it was almost chilly. From below she heard Mother humming the song she'd begun to sing earlier. Then she and Father were singing softly, sadly, together. But it wasn't all sad. She couldn't make out the words, though she strained to hear them. But she understood something of what it meant.

It was sad, yes. But there was a note of hopeful longing woven into the aching heartbreak of the tune. She closed her eyes on tears.



Chapter Four

THE LADY

Heather woke early, though she had not slept well. All night she dreamed of King Jupiter, tall and strong with golden armor gleaming in the sun. She had woken often, only to sleep again and continue the dream. Now she got out of bed and crept past Picket, who was still asleep, and made her way down the winding stairs.

Father had hollowed out the elm years ago and made this beautiful stairway. She loved the smooth feel of the railing and the beauty of the pale grain of the carved elm. Breakfast smells found her as she descended, making her smile even as she yawned.

She heard shifting chairs and low conversation and paused a moment to listen. She heard an unfamiliar voice, female and ancient-sounding, say in a hoarse whisper, “They are on the move now; it is certain. I risked much coming here, I know. I think he may decide this place is safe.”

Heather waited a moment; then she heard her father speak. “He may well. He’s one of few who know we’re here.

THE GREEN EMBER

Are you sure you weren't followed?" Father sounded worried, which worried Heather.

"I usually am. He knows Morbin is seeking the Green Ember," she said. "Morbin has set his wolves on the hunt."

Heather went on, rounding the last of the spiral steps to find her parents at the table with the stranger, whose back was to Heather.

"Good morning, Heather," Mother said, changing her face from worried to welcoming in an instant. "Go back up and wake Picket, dear. Then come and eat something. We have a guest we'd like you to meet."

The unknown lady and Father were hunched over some papers, some of which looked like maps. The guest was short and appeared to be much older than Mother. She wore the same sort of sweeping dresses Mother often favored—the kind almost no one in Nick Hollow wore. Hers was black, and she wore elegant long black gloves fringed with lace.

She sat up straight. Her fur was grey, peppered with black. She turned her head slightly and raised it to peer, slit-eyed, at Heather. She nodded Heather's way and then returned to her papers. She resumed her conversation with Father in hushed, insistent tones.

Father winked at Heather and gave her an encouraging smile before returning to attend to the maps and the mysterious lady.

Father's worried. What does that mean? She returned the smile but did not mask her concern. She ran back up the stairs and crossed to Picket's bed.

"Wake up, Picket," she whispered.

He didn't move.

"Wake up, Picket!" she whispered louder.

Nothing.

This time she got right next to his right ear, which was sagging over the side of his bed.

"Picket! Wake up!" she shouted.

He spun out of his bed, knocking Heather back and rolling over on the floor twice before bouncing up.

"I was already awake!" he said, staggering.

"Right," Heather said, laughing at him. "And I'm a woodpecker."

"You're almost as irritating as one," Picket said as he dug at his still sleepy eyes.

"Let's get downstairs," she said. "There's a lady down there who seems—I don't know—kind of important. She's talking to Mother and Father about something serious."

"I wonder what it is," Picket said.

"Let's go and try to find out."

"They never tell us anything when stuff like this happens," Picket said, stretching.

Picket was right. This sort of thing happened every few months but lately more and more. A stranger had come last month. It had been happening a lot since little Jacks was born six months before.

"You're right, Picket," Heather sighed. "They'll probably just send us for berries again."

"At least there's a built-in snack to that job."

THE GREEN EMBER

"True," Heather agreed, smiling. "Hey, Picket, did you dream of King Jupiter last night?"

"I tried," Picket said, shrugging, "but no such luck. You?"

"Yeah," she said. "Amazing ones."

"You always have great dreams."

"I always have vivid dreams," she said. "Sometimes they're not the good kind."

"I'd take it," he said. "I dreamed I was riding on a blind cardinal's back, and he kept flying into things."

That'll be the day, she thought. *He's afraid to climb a tree, let alone go soaring in the sky.* "That would be a funny story," she said.

"Why don't you make up one about it?" he said.

"Sure I will," she said, smirking.

"Heather, you should," he said, stifling a yawn. "You tell the best stories."

"Better than Father?"

"Well," he said, "maybe not quite the very best. But really, awfully, terribly good ones."

"Terribly awful?" she asked, scowling.

He laughed. "That's fair."

"I would love to write down these King Jupiter stories," she said.

"Hopefully we'll hear the rest today," Picket said.

"I hope so too. But we'd better get down there. We can ask Father later."

They descended the spiral stairway to the bottom floor. Picket had more to say.

THE LADY

"I wish I could have dreamed about him," he said as the kitchen came into view. Picket was looking up at Heather. "What a story! Do you think it's true, Heather? It must be, right? King Jupiter, Lord of the Great Wood. It must have been a lon—"

Picket stopped short when he saw the guest, who was standing beside Father at the foot of the stairs, looking at the two young rabbits.

She was short but graceful, stern-looking, with serious eyes. She crossed slowly to where they stood and looked each of them in the eyes in turn. Heather felt like she wasn't looking at their clothes or the color of their fur, but inside them.

The guest bent in front of Picket. "Would you like to think there was such a king in this world as Jupiter Goodson?" she said, peering into Picket's eyes.

At first Heather feared he wouldn't answer. He didn't like to be put on the spot. But he did answer. "More than anything, lady," he said, bowing.

Heather wasn't sure why, but it seemed the right thing to do. So when the lady looked at her, she curtsied, bowing her head.

"What about you, young maiden?" the lady said, peering into Heather's eyes. "Do you long for such a king?"

"With all my heart," she said without hesitation.

The lady turned to face Father and Mother, who stood arm in arm beside the table. She nodded to them. "You do well, my friends."

THE GREEN EMBER

“Thank you,” they said together.

“My dear young rabbits,” the lady said. “King Jupiter is gone, but others take up his cause, and another fills his place.”



Chapter Five

EASTERN WINDS

I don't think King Jupiter's cause is picking berries," Heather said. She and Picket had, as they had predicted, been ordered to make the trip into West Wood and pick berries after breakfast.

The stranger, who introduced herself as "Lady Glen," had said little at breakfast. They ate quickly, feeling the unspoken urgency in the air. Lady Glen eyed them sternly throughout, but before they left on their errand, she had given Heather a quick smile.

"You're right, Heather," Picket said, hurling a stick into a tangled bramble off the path. "But it's our job anyway. We may as well enjoy it."

Heather slumped her shoulders and pushed out her bottom lip, walking as if heavy with gloom. Then she burst off running with a laugh. "Last one to Gladeberry is a turtle!"

"No fair!" Picket shouted, running after her.

Heather was upset about being left out of the important stuff back at the house, but it was hard to be sad on a day like this. All around them, Nick Hollow was coming alive.

THE GREEN EMBER

The spectacular rainstorm of the day before had made everything greener and brighter. Never mind the broken limbs and downed trees; it was a perfect spring day, breezy and bright. The air was warm around them, and above them lay a deep blue blanket of sky. The sunlight sparkled through the wind-bent boughs of trees, dancing in an ever-shifting pattern of shadows along the path.

They ran for a long time, around Evergreen Row, along the widening stream, and even straight past Seven Mounds. Seven Mounds was always an enticement to distract them from chores, but not today.

Last summer they had discovered what appeared to be a hidden cave entrance at the base of the third mound. It was a small crack, almost impossible to see. They weren't sure if Heather could fit through it, and Picket had been too afraid to go in alone. They had agreed to try it again sometime but hadn't yet gotten up the courage.

"What a day!" Heather shouted as Picket caught up to her at Gladeberry Crossroads. They stopped to catch their breath. Heather looked down the lane that wound to their right—the way to Gladeberry. To the left, it was only a minute's run to Elric's Farm. She considered going down to check on old Mr. Elric but decided they'd better stick to their instructions. Plus, she hoped to see Lady Glen again. That parting smile had stuck with her.

"You ready?" she asked after a minute.

"Of course," he said, still puffing. "I was just stopping ... for you."

Heather smiled, shaking her head. *Why do boys have to pretend to be so tough?*

"All right," she said, clapping. "Let's—"

A faint but distinct scream came from the direction of Elric's Farm.

"Was that—?" Picket whispered, but Heather held up a hand for silence. She waited, hoping they would not hear it again. All she could hear was the beating of her own heart and Picket's labored breathing.

Another scream! This time louder and more urgent. There were more noises, gruff and insistent, followed by more screams.

"The house!" Heather shouted, grabbing Picket's arm. "Run!"

She darted off back in the direction of their home, running hard. Picket followed quickly, though they were both tired from their long run of just a few moments before. They moved fast, Heather in the lead. Every terrible possibility flashed before her eyes as she ran. She imagined their elderly neighbor, Mr. Elric, being attacked by enormous bloodthirsty hawks, talons razor-sharp and beaks gaping. Then she imagined them attacking her home, Baby Jacket, Mother, and Father.

Father would know what to do. They had to reach home. She noticed that Picket had lagged behind her, clutching his side.

"We have to move, Picket!" she screamed at him, stopping to let him catch up. Heather didn't know what to do.

THE GREEN EMBER

She considered running on ahead to warn their parents but heard the insistent voice of Father inside her head saying, “Always stick with your brother.” But was this different? “There’s no time!” she cried. “We can still make it in time to warn them, if we hurry. Think of Jacks!”

Picket nodded gravely, and, gasping for air, they launched into a full run once more. Heather smelled something awful. This day, which had been so bright and lovely only moments ago, felt suddenly heavy with doom. Even the sky seemed to darken and grow grey.

The smell was worse now, burnt and foul, and the grey haze thickened above. Heather’s foreboding grew. They raced past Seven Mounds and through Evergreen Row, worry filling their fast-beating hearts.

They turned the last corner out of West Wood, preparing to sprint across the meadow to their home. Heather skidded to a stop. She was not prepared for what she saw.

Their elm-tree home was on fire. Grey smoke pumped out of the upstairs and downstairs windows, spilled through the door to the porch, and gathered into the sky. Orange flames licked the higher branches and played at the edge of every opening.

Heather barely stifled a scream. In the smoky haze, she saw large black-clad figures in the meadow. Wolves, she realized with amazement. *Here? How?* She was incredulous. She had never seen a wolf but recognized them from her reading and her parents’ descriptions.

These wolves were organized. They clearly had captains

among them. She saw some barking orders and others in formations. They were all in uniform, dressed in black, with a red diamond symbol on their chests. The right side of the diamond fell away in a fang. Their arms were marked with what looked like a hideous brand, a wound standing out bare against their coarse fur. It looked like an M. She saw a terrifying scene of confusion.

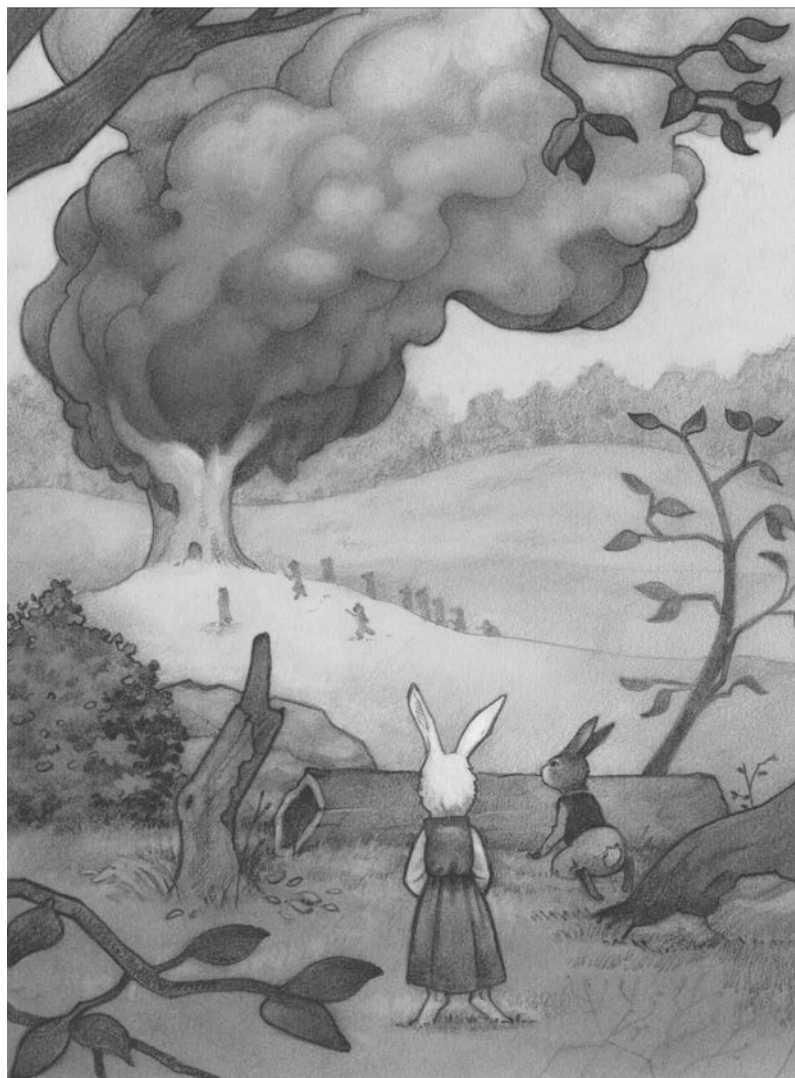
She hesitated only a moment, then grabbed Picket and dragged him back into the woods. Then she darted sideways, hauling her terrified brother into a thorny thicket. Once inside, they got a look at some of what was happening in the meadow. Their meadow.

Heather strained to see through the smoke, trying to find her parents and Baby Jacks. She saw a collection of around fifteen wolves in the foreground, about halfway up the meadow, near the fallen maple limb. The maple tree, half-burned with a tangled scar of black char where the lightning had ripped through it, somehow still stood. The hard rain had doused the flames that would have surely overtaken it.

It struck her as almost funny that she noticed the red ribbon of their starstick wedged in one of the still-intact limbs of that dying, damaged tree. Trapped forever in the clutches of a charred and crippled monster.

Some of the wolves were prowling around the edges of the pack, looking in all directions. Teeth bared, their harsh, snarling voices polluted the air. Heather viewed them as a foul offense. They looked, she saw with terror, very hungry. In the hazy distance near the house, she could vaguely see

THE GREEN EMBER



what looked like a struggle. She tried to make out the forms darting around through the smoke and flames. Was that grey form Father? She strained her eyes.

Picket interrupted her focus, sobbing loudly. She pressed her hand over his mouth, then shook him, finally lifting his chin to look in his eyes. She was stern, serious.

“Not now, Picket,” she whispered. “Later! What would Father want?”

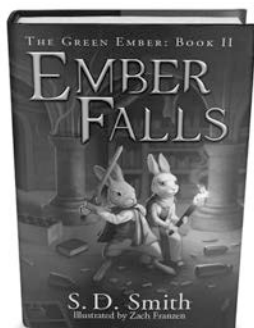
Picket nodded, raking his hand across his nose and sniffing. He took a deep breath. Heather gave him another stern look of confidence, nodding. Then she bowed her head, collecting herself to look again at the awful scene of her ruined home. She turned, then gaped in terror.

Five wolves were running straight at them.

If you loved *The Green Ember*,
There's more!



A short prequel
The Black Star of Kingston



and Heather and Picket's adventures continue in
The Green Ember: Book II
Ember Falls

Get your copy today at
www.sdsmith.net/store Amazon or your local bookstore



Keep up with author S. D. Smith

Sign up for his funny, infrequent newsletter for good deals, news about upcoming books, and more.

www.sdsmith.net/updates

If you loved the book, please give it a review online now. Positive reviews help so much. Thank you.