

*The **Black Star**
of Kingston*

Also by S. D. Smith
Reformation Lightning

The Green Ember Series

The Green Ember

Ember Falls

Ember Rising

Ember's End

Green Ember: Old Natalia

The Black Star of Kingston

The Wreck and Rise of Whitson Mariner

Prince Lander and the Dragon War

Green Ember: Archer

The Last Archer

The First Fowler

The Archer's Cup

GREEN EMBER *OLD NATALIA*

*The Black Star
of Kingston*

S. D. SMITH



Reformation
Lightning

Low Bleaks

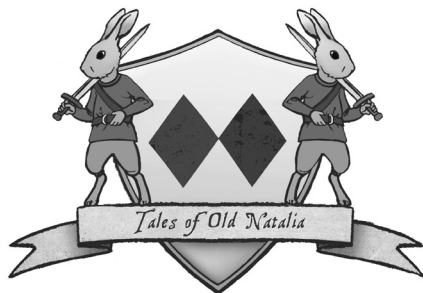
• *Kingston*

Ayman Lake

Dobble's Point

Seddleton •

*Forzthe Longreader's
Map of Natalia
as it pertains to the account of
The Black Star of Kingston*



Chapter One

Whitson Mariner, king of the displaced rabbits of Golden Coast, settled his community near Ayman Lake in the lands he called Natalia. It was a welcome refuge after the bitter inland trek that followed hard on their tumultuous sea passage. For the first time since their long voyage began and they came to the shores of Natalia, Whitson thought he might, at last, have brought his community home.

They made camp. The camp became several neighbourhoods. The neighbourhoods began to look like a town. Whitson named the town Seddleton after brave Seddle herself, lost during the passage. Whitson married Lord Grant's daughter, Lillie, and later their son was born. They named him Lander. Prince Lander grew as

the town grew, and Whitson dared to be glad. He had always been wise enough to see and bold enough to act. Now he was becoming brave enough to hope. Hope grew in Natalia, like an uprooted flower finally placed in the sunlight and soil. But trouble never dies. It only lies there, sleeping lightly, prepared to roar awake at any moment.

★ ★ ★



King Whitson sat at his desk, his candle burning low and his vision blurry from endless reviews of supplies, personnel, tasks, and the never-ending list of urgent needs. Queen Lillie sat nearby, sewing at her own desk.

Whitson rubbed at his eyes and finally put down the labour manifest, sighing as he did. He dipped his pen and signed the bottom of the page, blew on it, then spread a small measure of sand on the signature. He waited a

moment, then spilled the sand into a bin and stuffed the paper into an envelope. After closing it, he spilled candle wax onto the seal, removed his ring and stamped the wax, then blew on it. He added the letter to a pile and took up the next paper in his stack.

“And now the Widows List,” he said. “Always a sad business.”

“Yes,” Queen Lillie answered. “But you’ll be sadder still if you don’t attend to that stack of papers.”

“It will never end, Lillie,” he said, staring up above her head at a painting of a great ship at sea. He sighed.

“Nor will my sewing,” she said. “If you’re going to be buried in tasks like a king, you must at least dress like one.”

He laughed, rubbing his eyes again before peering down at his desk with a grimace. There was a knock at the door. He glanced at Lillie, and she gave him a rueful smile.

“Come in,” he called, leaning back in his chair. A long, lean rabbit entered and bowed.

“Ah, Walters. Please tell me you haven’t brought another report for me to review.”

“I haven’t, Your Majesty,” Walters said.

"Then you are most welcome," Whitson said. But when he saw the look on Walters' face, he frowned. "What is it?"

"It's Lord Grimble," Walters said, casting an uneasy glance at the queen.

"Of course it is," he said. "What now?"

"He's in council this moment, angling to clear-cut the northeast glade for winter fuel stocks," Walters said, uneasy. "In . . . well . . . in contrast—"

"It's not *contrast*," Walters," Whitson said, scowling. "It's *contradiction*. It's specifically what I said must not be done."

"Yes, sir," Walters said, nodding. He looked pained, like the awkwardness of nobles disputing was too much for him.

"Does anyone speak against him?" Queen Lillie asked, her mouth tight.

"Mother Saramack," Walters said, "and that quite boldly."

"Once again," Whitson said. "She is as determined to build as he is to destroy, though he is far from her equal. Now I feel awful for complaining about the Widows List."

"Mother Saramack would agree with you," the queen said.

Walters coughed.

“Thank you, Walters,” Whitson said. “Let us know if Lord Grimble plans to burn down our home.”

Walters bowed awkwardly and hurried out.

When he was gone, Queen Lillie spoke. “Is he insane?”

“Walters? No, he’s just anxious,” Whitson said.

“Grimble,” she said, frowning.

“I know, dear,” Whitson said, taking her hands in his. He looked around. “Is Lander with your father?”

“Yes,” she said.

“Then we must talk about this,” Whitson said, kneeling beside her. “The more wood we clear, the more vulnerable we are. But right now we have no real alternative. So Lord Grimble sows discord.”

“But why? Why does he always feel the need to oppose you? What can he accomplish by it?”

“He’s a bitter old rabbit. I think it’s more about lost ambition than any real scheme he has now. He wanted to be king. He never will be. So he must oppose me at every turn.”

“He must never be king.”

“No. Never! I have tried to reach out to him, Lillie.”

“I know. You even gave his son a command,” she said. “You haven’t repaid him insult for insult.”

“I can’t meet him on the ground he wants. I can’t be seen as a petulant striver.”

“No, dear,” she said. “You must be what you are, a wise king.”

“I don’t think he will resort to anything desperate, but I want Lander to be prepared.”

She glanced at the back wall, a thoughtful expression on her face. Looking back at Whitson, she nodded.

“Then we agree?” he asked.

“Yes,” she said, exhaling heavily. “He’s too young, of course. But perhaps it will ground him a little.”

“He’s a hard one to wrangle, that’s for sure. He . . .” Whitson paused, cocking his ear. He frowned. “Did you hear . . .”

Queen Lillie nodded towards the side cabinet. Whitson nodded back and slowly walked over to it. He knelt before a low wooden door covered with sketches and detailed plans of ships and knocked once. After listening for

a moment and hearing nothing, he knocked again. This time there was a return knock from within.

Whitson opened the door. Prince Lander was squished inside, a guilty expression on his face.

“You don’t fit in there quite as easily as you used to,” the king said, pulling his son free.

Lander tumbled out and onto the floor at his father’s feet.

“I’m sorry,” he said, rubbing his knees.

“You should be, son,” Whitson said, helping Lander up. “I know you’re curious, but sneaking is no virtue for a king.”

“It’s no virtue for *any* rabbit,” Queen Lillie said, eyebrow arched.

“Yes, Father,” he said. “Yes, Mother.”

Whitson looked at Lillie, his eyes full of questions. She nodded calmly.

“Come with me, son,” the king said, crossing to his desk.

Lander ran to his father’s side. “Are you going to show me maps, Father?”

“Not today, son. I want to give you something. Something heavy and lovely.”

“Heavier than the wooden ship you made for me?”

“Something nearly as heavy as my crown,” Whitson said.

Queen Lillie laid aside her sewing and stood. She came close and put her arm around Lander. “We know it isn’t easy for you to be our son.”

“They think it is,” he said. His head went down.

“The other children?” she asked.

He nodded.

“I’m sorry,” she said. She wrapped him in a hug. While Lander leaned into his mother’s embrace, Whitson crossed to the back wall and pushed against one of the planks. It gave way, turning on a pivot to reveal a hollow space behind the wall. Whitson pulled a lever within, cranking it several times. As he did, another part of the wall folded in and rose, revealing a hidden chamber.

Inside were many treasures, including golden armour, elegant clothes, and several weapons. Whitson glanced at a corner where a carved box sat on an elaborate stool, an old stone sword mounted above it. He touched his ears, his eyes, and then his mouth, muttering with his head down. Smiling, he turned and tugged on a long trunk, pulling it out into the room and dragging it to his desk.

Lander turned, his eyes widening when he saw the trunk. He craned his neck and peered at the room in the wall.

“Secrets,” he whispered.

“We have a few,” Queen Lillie said, smiling.

“And there’s one we want to share with you today,” Whitson said. “Something very important.”

“Yes, Father.”

“This is a trunk the old king gave me. Do you remember me telling you about the old king, about your Grandfather Whit and the heroes of Golden Coast?”

“I remember it all, Father,” he said. “I’m sorry I never met Grandfather Whit. Grandfather Grant says he was a great lord.”

“He was a good rabbit, and a wonderful father,” Whitson said. He cleared his throat.

“Grandfather Grant says we’re only all alive because of how you saved everybody in your ships,” Lander said.

“That’s true,” Queen Lillie said.

“Grandfather Grant says it was like a new leaping?”

“Well,” Whitson said, raising his eyebrows, “I wouldn’t go that far. But we have made our

own crossing. Not over a chasm, as with the old ones, but over the wide, wild sea.”

“Like Flint and Fay,” Lander said. “But on your ships.”

Whitson smiled at his son. To him, Lander was the most miraculous result of a long series of miracles. *For you, my son, I would do as my father did on Golden Coast. I would trade my life for yours in a moment.* Whitson felt a great wave of sadness then. But it crashed, as always, on a shore of hope. At least when he looked at his son.

“I have a gift for you, Lander,” Whitson said. He opened the trunk and reached inside.