

***Prince Lander
& the Dragon War***

Also by S. D. Smith
Reformation Lightning

The Green Ember Series

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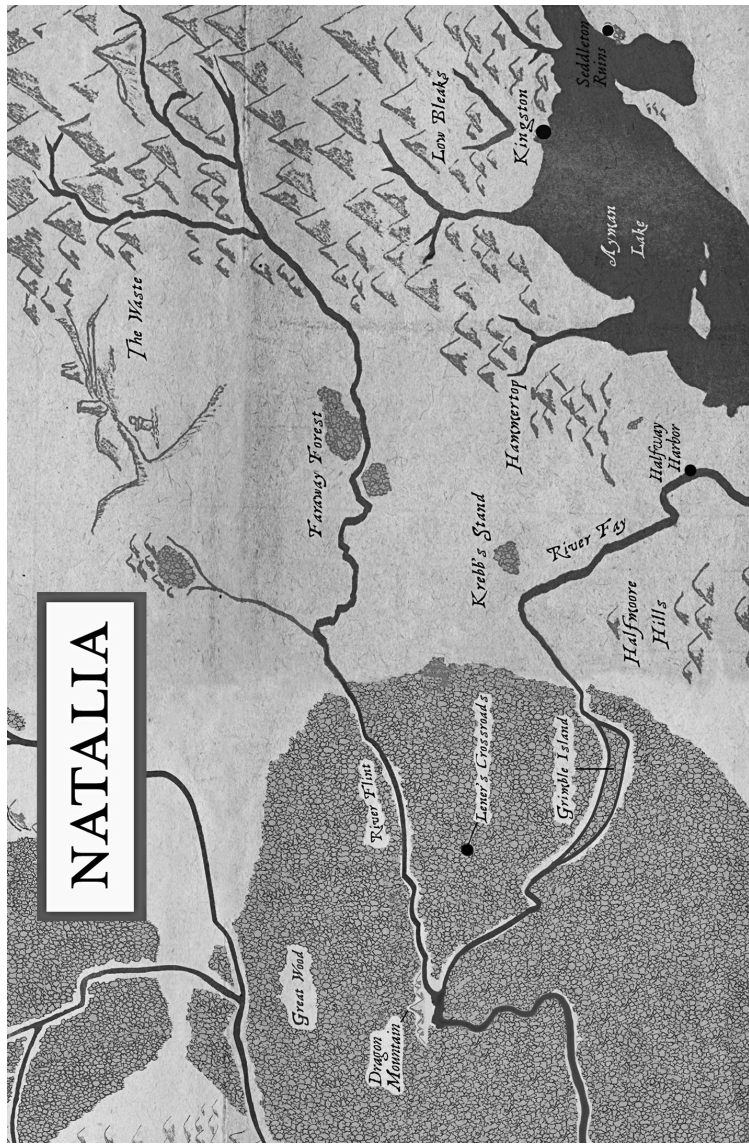
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S. D. SMITH



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Lightning

NATALIA



*I saw the young prince fall at the edge of our camp.
I know the dragon king's own blade carried his
blood. We all mourned for him, but our king was
ever after changed. We settled in to defend with all
we had. I was there when the end really did come,
when the fire we had feared threatened to consume
all. In the end, it took so much. But I was gone when
it took him.*

From the Journal of Massie Burnson



Chapter One

Prince Lander flanked his father as they trudged forwards in the snow, headed towards a shameful treaty with their bitter enemies.

“Get me Captain Massie!” King Whitson Mariner shouted back to his trailing train of officers and soldiers, his eyes unfocused as he limped along.

“Captain Massie is gone, Father,” Prince Lander said, darting a worried look back through the falling snow at his brothers, Lemual and Grant. This was not the first time Father had asked for Captain Massie today. “It’s been weeks, sir.”

“Of course,” King Whitson replied slowly, shaking his head as they halted. “I had forgotten a moment, son. Forgive me.”

“It’s nothing, Father,” Lander replied, and he smiled as confidently as he was able to with honesty. It had been nearly two months since Doctor Grimes had told the family about King Whitson’s affliction. Over time, the king would lose his power to think clearly. Before he reached old age, King Whitson’s mind would waste away and he would die. Grief washed over Lander as he laid his hand on his father’s shoulder. “Should we advance, sir? Lord Grimble will be waiting.”

King Whitson coughed, looked around anxiously, then nodded. Grant, the brown-furred and barely of age fourth child of King Whitson and Queen Lillie, crossed his arms and spat. He grumbled, “If that oathbreaker Grimble somehow keeps his word this time.”

Lemual, the short and slight-framed second-born, shook his head, with a pleading look in his eyes and a nervous glance back towards their camp. Lander shrugged.

Prince Lander, the firstborn son and heir to King Whitson, agreed with his brothers and

shared their worries. How could they go against everything their father had done for years? How could they leave the camp?

Lord Grimble wasn't to be trusted. He had proven that again and again. It had been many years since Grimble's first betrayal, back when Lander was only a child. But Lander was grown now, a seasoned veteran and a heroic captain of their kind. King Whitson, with what strength of mind and body he had remaining, insisted he was aiming to build an alliance that could defend and hold out against the dragons before his own end came. Whitson believed it was imperative to unite all the fractured rabbits of Natalia to accomplish this seemingly impossible task. Whitson's war plan came down to this call: *Defend all. All defend.* Yes, Lander agreed with his brothers that Grimble—a treacherous rabbit lord who had an alliance with the dragons—was not to be trusted. However, he also agreed with his father that their own band wasn't strong enough to defend against the dragons on their own.

A quandary.

Grant clenched and unclenched his fist over his sword hilt, agitation plain on his face.

“Father! We absolutely *cannot* all go with you. We must keep a leader with a stronger force at camp.”

Lander sighed. He knew this wouldn’t help.

“Are you king now, Grant?” Whitson asked, his eyes flitting lazily around his senior officers. “Do you wish,” he paused, looking around in confusion for a moment, then continued, “to argue yet again?”

“Father, no,” Grant said, hurrying up beside him. “You are king and I’m your servant—”

“—my son,” Whitson corrected. “My dear, dear son.”

“Yes, Father,” Grant replied. “I will follow you anywhere, of course. I’m not afraid to die, only—”

“Only you’re certain you know better than a dimwitted oldster who can’t remember what day it is or who is where half the time?”

“No, Father . . .”

Lander frowned. “Get back now, Grant. Leave Father to lead.”

“You always say that,” Grant hissed. “But one day this will fall to you, or Lemual, or me, and I don’t want it to all be lost by then.”

“Follow orders, Prince Grant,” Lord Arben snapped. “Lord Grimble was right about you. You’re a hotheaded fool and are sure to wreck everything!”

“Don’t talk to him like that,” Lemual said, stepping forwards as the officers and lords all spoke at once with raised, angry voices.

Whitson raised his hand for silence, then turned to his fourth-born son. “Grant Whitson, my dear buck.” With an outstretched arm he beckoned his son to him, then slowly hooked his arm around Grant’s shoulder. “You remind me of your grandfather. Lord Grant lived long on Golden Coast and came here with me, his son-in-law, and followed me loyally every day of his life in Natalia. He died defending our folk when you were knee-high. He knew what it meant to be a noble—to act nobly.”

Lander hung his head. His Grandfather Grant had been precious to him. His death was an enduring wound and turned Lander’s heart to thoughts of revenge against Lord Grimble. Lord Grant had died fighting Grimble’s oathbreaking faction, not the dragons. The dragons had killed Lander’s brother, Davis, yes. But both died following Father’s uncompromising plan of defending their camp at all costs and with everything they had.

Grant shrugged. “Yes, Father. Isn’t it our duty to protect our own, as he did?”

Whitson wiped at his mouth, then nodded. “What is the duty of a king?” he asked.

“To serve. To do rightly. To be first into danger and last out. To rule so that those under his rule are as free and good as they can possibly be.”

“True. All of that is true.” Whitson squeezed his son close, and his voice dropped lower. “He must also inspire them to follow, if he can. He must invite them to follow, if he cannot inspire them. And if he can do neither, he must insist that they follow.”

Lander was close enough to hear. He saw Grant’s eyes go from their father to the surrounding bucks—trusted officers and armed soldiers—many of whom had fought by Whitson’s side since the beginning of his voyage.

Understanding dawned on Grant. He closed his eyes and exhaled. “Forgive me, Father. I will close my mouth and keep my place.”

“It may comfort you to know this,” Whitson whispered just loud enough for Lander to hear. “I have laid a trap for Grimble. You see, son, we have a traitor among our innermost councillors. I had to confirm some suspicions.”

Grant's eyes grew wide. "If I have ruined that plan, Father, I am mortified! Oh, Father, I am so sorry."

Whitson smiled. "You have not ruined it, son," he whispered. "You have carried it out."

Grant cocked his head sideways, and his mouth fell open, a perplexed expression on his face. But Lander smiled, his heart flooding with relief. *He knows who the spy is.*

"Prince Lander," Whitson said, turning swiftly. "Please arrest Lord Arben and Captain Danker. We do aim to make a treaty with Grimble, if he will see sense. But we will not be spied upon by him in the meantime."

Lander nodded towards Captain Rin. The captain and four of his bucks in the king's royal guard surrounded the traitors. Lander stepped forwards. "I arrest you in the name of the king on suspicion of treason."

"You are making a treaty with Grimble, Your Majesty!" Lord Arben shouted. "It is not treason to merely converse with an ally."

"So you admit it?" Whitson snapped, seeming sharper than he had in weeks. "It is certainly treason to scheme with the king's enemies against him. It is certainly treason to conspire