

GREEN EMBER

III: EMBER RISING

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Reformation
Lightning

PROLOGUE

“You’ve seen the ghost too?” Prince Lander asked, edging near Massie as they slowed to pick their way through a tangled patch of brush.

“The ghost, Your Highness?”

“Something’s out there,” Lander said, “and it’s hard to spot.”

“Don’t give in to fearful fancy. It’s probably nothing.”

“I’m not as experienced as you are, Lieutenant Massie,” Lander said, “but in my short life I’ve found it’s almost never *nothing*. It’s something. Monsters are real; I know that. Ghosts probably are too.”

“Just be ready with that sword, sir,” Massie said. “I’d wager our steel will find more than mist if this *ghost* attacks.”

“I’m ready. Whoever took my mother will answer for it.”

Massie nodded. The two emerged through the tangled thicket, and their path was clear for a few minutes. They neither saw nor heard anything unusual. They hurried on.

Massie ducked a dangling limb and emerged into another small clearing, slowing to examine tracks and allow the prince to catch up. He paused over a troubling set of footprints, again trying to determine what might have made such a mark. The prince drew near, breathing hard.

“Are you all right, Your Highness?”

“I’m...completely...fine,” Lander managed to say between gasps.

Massie smiled. “What do you make of these tracks? Our ghost?”

Lander, still breathing hard, bent to examine the strange shapes. “It looks like a monster, but not the monsters we’ve seen.”

“Not the monsters we’ve seen,” Massie mused, his brow wrinkled. “If there’s anything worse than the monsters you know...” he began.

“It’s them you don’t,” Lander finished.

“Are you scared?” Massie asked.

“Yes,” Lander admitted, “but I remember what Captain Blackstar told me. He said we have to keep loving what’s on the other side of this fight—the other side of this rescue—and that will have to make us brave.”

from *The Wreck and Rise of Whitson Mariner*

THE SLAVE WHO SANG

Heather closed her eyes, wincing as she lurched forward. Her uncle shoved her roughly toward the hangar at the far end of Morbin's lair.

"Now you'll join the slaves," Garten Longtreader growled. "You'll see what it means to defy Lord Morbin."

Barbed retorts formed in her mouth, but she swallowed them down. *I need to stay alive now.*

Heather glanced back at the frenzied scene. Chaos reigned in Morbin Blackhawk's lair. A slave had sung a song of defiant beauty in the dark heart of the Preylords' kingdom. Lord Gern was scouring the palace for her. For the slave who dared to defy them.

For the slave who sang.

Gern didn't know who it was. Nor did Morbin know the secret singer's name.

But Heather knew. Heather had heard that voice a thousand times.

The singer was Sween Longtreader, her beloved mother.



“Here!” Garten shouted, signaling for a waiting bird to stoop. Heather followed her uncle onto the raptor’s back. At Garten’s command, the eagle leapt free of the platform and dropped, descending into the predawn darkness. Heather’s heart was in her throat, both because of the sudden drop and because she feared for her mother.

The bird extended his wings, caught a current of wind, and sailed forward through the vast area of uncountable trees. Heather saw, by the light of perched torches, that the trees were honeycombed with elaborate structures of various sizes and shapes. These all clung to the trees, dwellings nestled in the curve of huge limbs. She had never seen structures of this size. Though the sun still slept, there was a buzz of humming industry and innumerable lamps illuminating a busy hive of hurry all around. Silhouetted forms scurried in and out and all along dimly lit paths. Many were rabbit forms. She streaked by in dizzy flight, wondering a thousand things about those lives lived among the enemy’s trees. Did these rabbits even see the raptors as enemies?

The bird twisted through the massive heights of the High Bleaks, the historic home of the Lords of Prey. Heather was seeing what no free rabbit had ever seen: the swollen base from which the Preylords hatched their hateful scheme of conquest and enslavement on all of Natalia.

And it had worked. She was, she realized with a pang, joining the slaves. She was no longer free.

But Emma, the princess and heir of King Jupiter, *was* free. And so the cause for which Heather had traded her liberty, and very likely her life, was alive.

That truth was like a flint strike in her heart. A spark of hope.

They broke through the corridor of tall trees, and Heather gasped at the sudden gaping space. In the middle of the high forest lay a barren area, a giant crater in the hard stone of the mountain. A river ran down the mountain and spilled down the high wall in a waterfall. A heap of trash, impossibly wide, rested against the lip of the plunging pit. The vast dump was burning, and scatterings of ash wafted into the acrid air. Ash floated over the pit and drifted, like snow, down and down on a small city at its rocky bottom.

“This is Akolan,” Garten called above the howling wind. “It’s one of two cities I superintend. The other is First Warren, the former stronghold of the old king. Akolan, here in the High Bleaks, is your home now. If you can stay alive. Your family has a bad habit of trying to get killed.”

Did he mean Mother? Did he know she was the slave who sang?

“Of course I know,” he said, reading her face. He looked away. “I would know that voice anywhere.”

“Is she...?” Heather began.

“She put herself in great danger, of course.” There was a look of mixed appreciation and anger on her uncle’s face. “But she has a knack for getting away.”

“She does?”

“She escaped from my trap all those years ago,” he said, eyes staring off into a hazy past. Then he shook his head and went on. “She’s no helpless doe. Like you, there’s far more to her than what’s obvious.”

“Is your brother—Is my father here?” she asked, suddenly desperate to know. “And Jacks?”

Uncle Garten’s eyes flashed. “We will not speak of him!” She fell silent.

They were circling the great pit now, avoiding the worst of the falling ash. Heather saw a thousand firelights below and the outlines of neighborhoods sprawled across the bottom of the city cut from stone. She could see a circle in the center, with several distinct groupings of light surrounding this wall in the middle of the city. For that is what it was—a wall. And within that wall blazed the most light.

“For Sween’s sake,” Uncle Garten went on, calmer, as they began to drop into the massive cavern, “I do not acknowledge any connection. She knows I won’t go out of my way to hurt her, but neither will I assure her safety. I am, after all, Morbin’s ambassador. That is my first duty.”

Heather wanted to say so much, ask so much, yet she knew she must choose her words carefully. But her own anger was beginning to boil.

“To whom are you an ambassador, Uncle?”

“To Bleston—now Kylan, I suppose,” he said, “to First Warren, and to everyone here,” he pointed at the grim city below, “in Akolan.”

“To this prison camp of a city?”

“Yes.”

“To these rabbits you helped enslave?”

“Yes,” he said, his words growing harder.

“I’m sure Grandfather would be proud,” she said.

“You should know, oh great Scribe of the Cause, that we each tell ourselves a story about our place in the world.”

“But the story needs to be true,” she said.

“Who is to say what’s true?” he asked. “All who claim to know it are only seeking power. Which side is right? History will decide in a hundred years.”

“If you’re on the side that murders, betrays, and enslaves,” she said, “that might give a hint.”

“To the Lepers’ District!” Garten shouted forward, enraged. The bird swooped hard left and dipped down, finally gliding above the far northern edge of the city. They flew past the moonlit waterfall, heard its constant roar and rumble in the otherwise quiet night. There were few lights to be seen here on the edge of the pit, and a foul stench rose from the mangled hovels below. She couldn’t make out the ground but could feel that they weren’t quite near enough to land. “Here’s where you get off,” Garten said bitterly. He rammed his elbow into her head, knocking her back to roll off the bird’s back.

She fell into the dank, foul darkness below.