

GREEN EMBER

IV: EMBER'S END

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Reformation
Lightning

PROLOGUE

Massie hurried to the top of the central mountain, where Lander Whitson stood amid a ruin of smoking rocks. The stench of death hung in the fetid air.

“Sir,” Massie said, dropping to one knee. “The lords await your decision.”

Prince Lander’s strange faraway gaze traced the river below; the forest extended from each bank into an incomprehensible distance. “Captain Massie, this wood . . . it is great, I think. I look at it and seem to see our kind thriving here.”

Massie rose and turned to take in the spreading forest. “Yes, sir. The wood is vast and uncultivated. It would require tremendous work.”

“It will be my life’s work,” Lander said, unblinking eyes gazing off to the horizon.

Massie passed his hand over his eyes. “Sir, the decision?”

Lander turned to Massie, but his eyes kept their peculiar look. “We must bury the threat and our best weapon against it together.”

“What will we do?” Massie asked, eyes closing tight. “It will be too easy to find.”

“We’ll dam the river, build up our warren, and make this mountain forbidden. We will try to forget.”

“But sir, what if the worst happens?”

“Then one from my line will remember. And when the time comes, he will rise.”

From Prince Lander and the Dragon War

JO, COLE, AND HEYNA

Jo Shanks crept through a tangle of trees on the edge of the Terralain camp. Looking back, he saw that Cole and Heyna Blackstar were still behind him. The jet-black twins seemed at ease, despite the unsettling odds of being only three among thousands of enemies. Jo wasn't so calm. He absent-mindedly patted his quiver, locked down and fastened tight on his right side, and pressed ahead. He had to be careful of these new arrowheads with their tiny flint-and-fire mechanisms. *I don't need to blow myself up here.* He smirked and adjusted his pack, with its ramrod staves crossed in an X pattern poking out behind him.

He paused at the edge of a clearing. Bright blazes from successive sentry fires dotted the way to the camp's center, splashing dashes of light along a path clotted with guards. Jo frowned.

It will be better if we don't have to kill any rabbits to get what we came for.

Jo eased past a momentarily distracted sentry and disappeared again into a black patch of shadow, closer



now to the elusive center of the camp. He peered ahead, trying to make out—among the shadows shaking in the flickering firelight—which of those tents might hold the answers he sought.

I wonder if Cole and Heyna made it past the last guard yet. Glancing back, he nearly cried out. Cole's face was inches from his own.

Behind her smirking brother, Heyna smiled. "You seem tense, Jo," she whispered.

Jo sighed, shaking his head. "I'm prepared to die by getting caught," he whispered, "but not by heart attack because of you two idiots creeping up on me like that."

"Which tent is our target, Jo?" Cole asked, peering into the darkness. Jo turned back to the camp.

Heyna quietly swept aside a knot of braided branches to get a closer look. “Where’s a tent that looks like it belongs to a scary old maniac?”

“He doesn’t scare me,” Jo said, unable even to convince himself.

“Not as much as we do, anyway,” Heyna said.

“Shhh,” Cole hissed, as two guards broke off from the nearest fire and walked straight toward them. Jo eased onto the ground, eyes wide. He held his breath.

The guards’ faces were masked in shadow, but their forms, dark against a blaze of fire behind, were distinct. One seemed average size for the Terralains—still quite tall and strong by Jo’s reckoning. The second was, even by Terralain’s outsized standards, truly massive. Their words, too distant and quiet to be heard at first, grew distinct as they came closer.

“... always understood. And anyway, we won’t get a chance to even prepare for the festival.” This was the larger soldier. “We’ll never get home on time.”

“I know why you want to get back for the festival, Tunk.” The shorter guard was speaking. “Just you focus on the battle coming. We knock these betraying bucks on the head; then we head home to the revels.”

They stopped ten paces from Jo, Cole, and Heyna.

“I’m focused, Dooker,” the giant Tunk said. Jo saw now that the rabbit had grey fur with a white ring around his right eye.

“Stay sharp. See you at next shift,” Dooker said. Tunk saluted, and Dooker hurried on past them, peering

into the woods as he worked his way up to the next sentry fire.

Jo didn't move. Tunk turned, his back to the forest, and gazed around, back and forth. Seeing none of his comrades, he took off his helmet and scratched his head. "Itch all day..." he muttered. Tunk replaced his helmet, cocking it more comfortably on his head as he pivoted, his eyes thinning to slits, and peered into the forest. Jo closed his eyes, hoping the hulking buck's vision wasn't sharp. After an agonizing minute, Jo opened his eyes and saw that Tunk was turned away again and seemed to be gazing at the distant fires and the moon, alternately. Jo glanced over at Cole, then Heyna. Both twins nodded. *It's time to move on.* Jo rose to his knees, then carefully found his feet.

Tunk began humming, and Jo froze. Then the great buck's hips began to shift, and the humming grew louder. Jo exchanged a worried glance with Cole and Heyna. Then all three looked over at Tunk, whose hips were now moving back and forth while his foot began tapping.

"Come, ye fine..." Tunk began, mumbling at first. Then, finding his melody, he sang softly as his dancing grew more assured.

*"Come, ye fine does,
And look upon me!
For I move like a moonbeam,
On the swaying trees.
Come, ye fine does,
And look upon me.*

*My limbs are all nimble,
My heart is all free!
Come, ye fine does,
And look upon me!
If you like my dancing,
Why, then I'll dance with thee!"*

He danced as he sang, leaping and sliding, with such swelling energy that Jo's mouth dropped open and he had to be pulled away by Heyna, who followed her brother along the edge of the forest, closer still to the center of the camp.

Jo glanced back, fearful that they had been heard, but Tunk's song continued, along with his dance, until a noise from the sentry station further back caused him to stop, stiffen, and set his helmet straight again.

They were much closer now, and Cole pointed to a large pavilion just outside the big central fire around which rested many soldiers. Jo followed his gaze and nodded. Then Cole pointed past the pavilion to a section of readied catapults surrounded by blastpowder barrels.

"Okay," Jo whispered, and the Blackstar twins nodded.



Cole shifted forward, and Heyna squeezed Jo's arm. He smiled and saluted, and his friends disappeared into the shadows.

Jo, alone now, turned to the pavilion, scanning for a way in. Five Terralain soldiers were stationed outside the entrance to the large tent, each with a red shoulder shield. These bucks were a different breed than Tunk and Dooker. He remembered them from their days at Halfwind Citadel. An elite guard for Prince Kylen. They never spoke, only peered about them intently, their bodies calm but alive to every motion.

How am I supposed to get past them?

The central fire burst with an explosion.

Jo knew at once what had happened. *Well done, Blackstars!*

In the smoke, the red-shouldered guards darted ahead, drawing swords and arcing out in a practiced advance toward the direction of danger.

Jo saw his chance. While the guards moved toward the fire, Jo sprinted across the clearing and dived at the tent's bottom. He hit the ground and tried to slip under the edge but found it was sewn closed. He drew his knife and sliced across the seam, splitting it in time to slither between the wall and floor. Inside, he lay still. He could hear the waning noise outside. It was quiet in the tent.

The space was ample, but not vast. It was a leader's tent, provisioned with arms mounted along its canvas wall and a desk strewn with papers. Maps lay stacked on the desk's edge, and a wooden throne stood on a slight platform

raised midway before a long solid curtain that hid the other half of the inside area. Around the room the banners of Terralain—a black field dotted with silver stars—were displayed on modest mounts hung with lanterns.

Jo listened a moment longer, then rose slowly. He was creeping toward the desk when he heard loud voices just outside.

“Stand aside!” a confident buck cried.

Jo dived behind a banner, then rose to peer around it as two figures entered. One, a stout young buck with a worried expression, had his sword drawn. The other was a lanky old buck with beads and jewels braided into his fur.

Tameth Seer.

“Your Highness,” Tameth Seer said, his voice at a strange high and grating pitch, “I sense no danger to your brother’s life from assassins.”

Your Highness? Brother? Who can this be? Jo looked on, fretful.

“But what about Captain Vulm?” the stout buck asked quietly, gently dividing the inner curtain to gaze inside. Satisfied with what he saw, he stepped back.

“Of course, yes,” Tameth said. “That was very sad indeed. But he had not the protection Prince Kylan has. Please, my dear Prince Naylen, trust me—as your father, King Bleston, did. As your brother does even amid his affliction.”

Jo’s eyes widened. *So Kylan’s brother is here.*

“Father is dead, Master Seer.” Naylen gripped the armrest of the wooden throne. “My brother seems near death.”

“Do not worry, my prince.” Tameth stroked the young buck’s shoulder. “Picket Kingslayer and the Red Witch will pay for what they have done. They will pay for it soon.”

“Ought we attack them?”

“Yes, of course,” Tameth replied. “With the forces you have brought with you, we will crush them and seal our pact with Morbin. We shall rule the rabbit lands, and Morbin shall rule those of the raptors. It is settled.”

“You believe, honored seer,” Naylen began, “that Morbin would honor a pact?”

“I do, yes,” Tameth Seer said. “Has he not honored it with his ambassador? Garten Longtreader stood before us and swore it on the bloodstained edge of his blade. On his own niece’s blood.”

“He killed his own niece.” Naylen grimaced.

“Ambassador Garten killed their Scribe of the Cause. He cut down one of their leaders. This is war. He did what he had to do in service of his lord. The important thing is that Heather Longtreader is dead.”