

*The*  
**FIRST FOWLER**

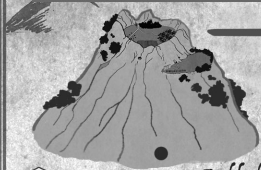
# GREEN EMBER ARCHER

*The*  
**FIRST FOWLER**  
***S. D. SMITH***



**Reformation**  
Lightning

- ▷ Village Green
- ▼ Community Garden
- ◆ Helmer's Tree
- ▲ Village
- Caves
- Plateau
- + Maggie's Porth



Rockback Valley

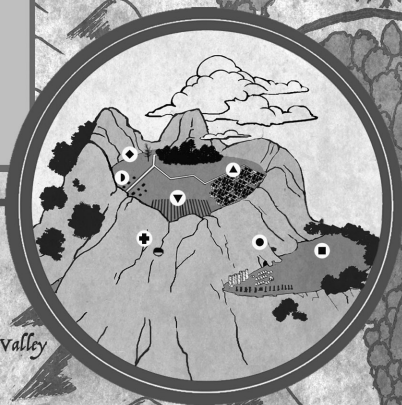


cloud Mountain



Halswind Citadel

To Jupiter's Crossing





## CHAPTER ONE

**J**o Shanks woke suddenly, gasping and wide-eyed.

A red-furred doe looked down at him, hands on hips and face smirking.

“I thought you were going to sleep all day,” she said. It was Emma, the newly promoted doctor whose expert care had helped him heal after the Battle for Cloud Mountain.

“Hard to sleep,” Jo said, trying to breathe easy and slow his racing heart, “when strange does hover over you with judgmental looks.”

She grinned; then her smile slowly faded. “I’m leaving, Jo.”

“What?” He rubbed at his eyes and sat up. “You’re what?”

"I'm leaving," Emma repeated, pouring a small measure of purple fluid from a jar into Jo's cup, "and so are you."

"I'm sorry, Emma. Hold on. I'm not quite awake yet. I was dreaming . . ." He hesitated, then smiled. "I sometimes dream of shooting arrows again for prizes and glory."

Emma handed him the cup and smiled. "Take this. It's your last draft. The archer's cup. The cup final. Drink it up, Jo."

He smiled. "Hopefully I'll fare better with this one."

"Barely losing to Nate Flynn is no bad outcome," she said. Jo had lost a close contest with the legendary Flynn just before coming to Cloud Mountain as part of his elite archery unit, the Bracers.

"Where are we going?" He drained the cup with a grimace.

"Well," she began, stoppering the jar and setting it back on a shelf, "I'm going to Harbone Citadel. They have an outbreak of blue fever. They need help."

"But that's so far . . . and so dangerous. Can't they send someone else?"

"It's all dangerous, Jo," she said, taking the cup back and setting it down on the table. "I didn't

become a doctor so I could be safe, just like you didn't choose to be a soldier for safety. They have sick there, and many of them are children. They're scared. I'm going."

Jo nodded. He had come to respect Emma as a more-than-competent doctor during the weeks of his recovery. But more than respect, he valued her friendship. While his wounds healed, she became his primary connection to what was happening in the world. She had shared Heather Longtreader's gripping story of the dramatic rescue and rise of King Jupiter's heir, carried off in large part by Heather's brother Picket. Emma also shared details about the challenges facing the long-hidden heir's fledgling coalition. Prince Smalden Joveson—Smalls, as his friends called him—was building an alliance to take on Morbin Blackhawk's preylord tyranny, and Jo was eager to be released from the hospital so he could be a part of it.

"Where am *I* going?" he asked.

"Home, I think. Halfwind. Anyway, I'm releasing you, and you'll be someone else's problem." She smiled. "Your shoulder will hurt for a while, but you're well enough to be out of here. I'll miss you, Jo. I wish you well."

“Thank you, Emma,” he said. “You’ve made me well. And you’ve been a good friend. May your feet find the next stone.” He touched his ears, eyes, and mouth, closing his eyes for a moment. When he looked up, she was gone.

Jo gathered his few possessions into his pack and left the hospital. He was keen to meet up with his unit, but there was one stop he felt he must make.

A few minutes later, he walked into the Savoury Den, joining the line of hungry diners moving up to be served. He was starving and had wanted to feast in this incredible eatery again ever since he’d been confined to the hospital, eating mild meals designed to help him heal. This place had food to bring a buck back from the dead, not just from some battle wounds. Jo stretched, feeling the tight muscles and lingering pain, especially in his shoulder. He gazed around, hoping to spot the portly proprietor, Master Gort, but couldn’t find him.

Then he heard a shout from inside the kitchen.

“Breshwack! I told you not to add anything to this dish, but you seem to have added everything!” That was Gort, and Jo smiled as the shouting continued. “Everything’s not nothing, is it, you air-brained apprentice?”

“It’s only a little salt,” the high-pitched voice of the apprentice replied, “and a teensy handful or two of all your other spices. It’s going to taste amazingly.”

“Amazingly?” Gort shouted so loudly that the entire line, stretching back to the cave entrance, could easily hear him. “What’s amazing is that I haven’t added salt and seven thousand other spices to you and cooked you in a pot for Nitwit Soup!”

“I’m mostly bones,” came the squeaky reply.

“I’ll break your bones!” shouted Gort, and a clanging chase ensued, enjoyed as a fairly usual kind of entertainment by the satisfied diners of the Savoury Den. The sound of the mad chase settled down as a thin buck in a messy apron, with white hat askew, came sliding out of the kitchen. He smiled at the diners, waved confidently, then hurried for the door to escape just as Gort waddled out. Gort gazed back and forth, eyes bulging and jaw tight. Not seeing his absent apprentice, he quickly changed his enraged expression to a hospitable one, nodding politely to the offered thanks of the grateful patrons. Everyone seemed to love the food here as much as Jo did.



“I’m glad you’re enjoying it,” Gort answered the praising guests. “Please . . . come back and have some more.”

The rotund cook bowed and backed into the kitchen, and the diners returned to their meals.

Jo smiled. Not wishing to lose his place in line or seek out the chef while he was busy and flustered, Jo decided to try to catch Master Gort another time. Instead, he discreetly examined those around him in line. Behind him a young soldier from Chelmsford Citadel waited with five of his fellows. The Chelmsford bucks had been too late to help in the last battle, but they had arrived shortly after, with Lord Felson pledging his support to Prince Smalls. Emma had told Jo that there were now more citadels pledged to the prince than opposed, and those opposed were losing support. He hoped it was just a matter of time before they all united against their common foes. Jo nodded to the soldiers, then turned around. The old buck in front of him, supported by an ornate cane, tottered a little as he shuffled ahead.

“Uncle,” Jo said softly, “may I bring you your portion?”

Jo wasn't related to the older buck, but *uncle* was a traditional term of respect. The elderly rabbit turned around slowly, smiled at Jo and nodded, then spoke in a slow, heavy-breathing whisper.

"Thank you . . . my lad." With his free, slightly shaking hand, he patted Jo's. "You're a tall one . . . aren't you, bucky?"

"I suppose so, sir. How does that seat suit you, Uncle?" Jo asked, pointing to a vacant chair at a table of young rabbits, many of them nurses.

The old buck nodded. "They might not . . . be ready for . . . the energy I bring . . . to dinner conversation."

Jo led him, very slowly, towards his seat. "I'm with you, sir."

"My name's Caldwell . . . I reckon you know yours," the old buck said, smiling up at Jo.

"Forgive me, Master Caldwell," Jo said, "my name is Jo Shanks. I'm very pleased to meet you, sir."

"The pleasure . . . is mine, young Jo," Master Caldwell said, slowly easing into his seat with Jo's help.

“Pardon me,” Jo said, addressing the smiling young does at the table, “this is Master Caldwell. Be warned, he’s a champion conversationalist.”

“We’re very pleased to meet you, sir,” a brown doe said, looking up from her meal. “I was just off to get a drink. May I bring you some tea?”

Jo hurried back to the line, and the Chelmsford soldiers motioned for him to resume his spot.

“That’s good of you, soldier,” a short buck at the fore of his fellows said, “to take care of an old veteran like that.”

“Maybe someone will take care of us one day, if we survive,” Jo said, extending his hand. “I’m Jo Shanks, from Halfwind.”

“I’m Ricker, from Chelmsford,” the short buck replied. “You fellas had all the fun without us. Good work, but we were sore not to be in it.”

“I have a feeling you’ll get your chances pretty soon,” Jo said. “How long are you bucks here for?”

“Not sure, really. Our lord is huddled up with the others and the prince. They’ll say ‘Jump!’ and we’ll say, ‘Into which wolf trap should we blindly bound?’ And then they’ll tell us, I guess.”

“I like your take on things, Ricker.” Noticing they were now nearly to the front of the line, Jo

turned back to the bucks. “May your feet find the next standing stone.”

“Thanks, Shanks,” Ricker replied. “And, as we say in Chelmsford, ‘May your intelligent scout, and infallible guide . . . not lead you to lose your fluffy backside.’”

“Now that’s a blessing I can back!” Jo laughed, shaking hands with all the Chelmsford bucks.

A tall officer with the Chelmsford arms on his shoulder hurried up. “Ricker.”

“Aye, sir!” Ricker replied, coming to attention and saluting.

“We have a mission for you,” the officer said, his face grave. “It’s what you asked for, Ricker. It’s about as dangerous as they come.”

Ricker nodded, glancing back at his fellows, who suddenly looked serious and certain. Ricker turned back to the officer. “We’re in, sir.”

“Follow me.”

Jo watched them go, his heart sinking. He received and served a meal to Master Caldwell but didn’t stay to eat with the grateful old buck.

Jo wasn’t hungry anymore.