

*The*  
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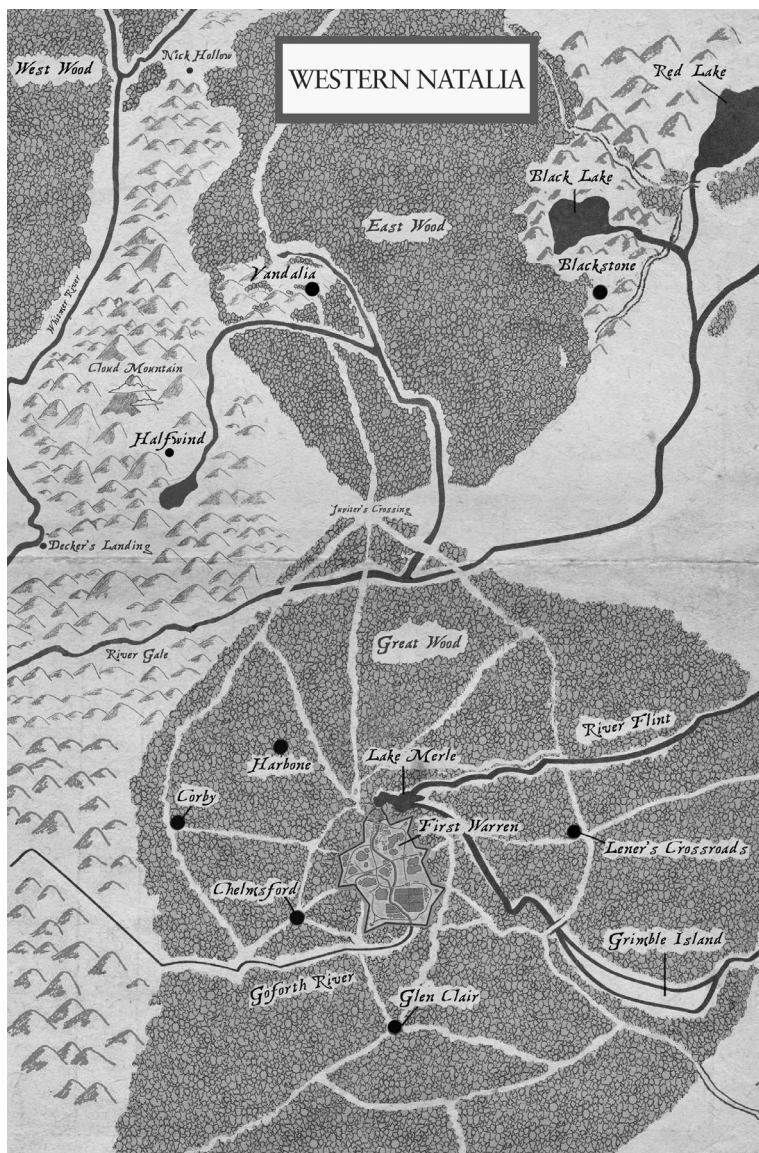
The Archer's Cup

# GREEN EMBER *ARCHER*

*The*  
**ARCHER'S CUP**  
***S. D. SMITH***



**Reformation**  
Lightning





## CHAPTER ONE

**B**ow in hand, Jo Shanks flanked Princess Emma as they hurried along the path through East Wood. Emma was the daughter of King Jupiter and the recognised heir to the throne of Natalia. Well, she was recognised by *almost* all the free rabbits and their lords stationed in secret citadels up and down the map. There were still a few holdouts. The most notable of those opposing her claim? Blackstone Citadel. Their destination.

“Are you sure this is the best plan, Princess?” Jo asked, never taking his eyes off the forest. “Wouldn’t it be better to just get to Blackstone right when they expect us instead of this scheme to surprise Lord Ronan early and wrong-foot him in the negotiations?”

“It was kind of your idea, Jo,” Emma replied. Jo blinked. “How so?”

“You said, ‘Go straight for the heart. That’s what an archer does—goes straight for the heart.’”

“That doesn’t sound like me.”

“It sounds exactly like you,” Emma said, “because you said it.”

Jo shrugged. “Well, that was a long time ago.”

“It just happened,” Emma said. “Am I right, Heyna?”

Jo glanced back to see Heyna, Emma’s black-furred cousin and lady-in-waiting.

“It was an hour ago, Jo,” Heyna said. “But you wouldn’t be the first rabbit to strongly disagree with *you*. I do it all the time.”

“What’s going on?” Cole, Heyna’s twin brother, had stopped to let the others catch up.

“Jo’s being wrong again,” Emma said.

“Oh,” Cole said. “So, just like every other day?”

“Yeah.” Jo kept his eyes on the forest. “Things were different an hour ago. Apparently, I was so right that I swayed the leader of the cause and the hope of all Natalia. Didn’t hear a lot of naysayers back then.”

“We were stunned silent,” Heyna said. “And since it was actually my idea, and you just came

along and agreed with me, you were right then and wrong now.”

Jo peeked back at Heyna, who was as alert as ever. She and her brother often joked around—whenever Emma wasn’t near and especially at Jo’s expense—but in the past she had never let her guard down while protecting the princess. Now the doe seemed to have grown comfortable joking in Emma’s presence. The two had had a heartfelt conversation earlier in the day, from what Jo could tell. Heyna seemed more herself now, even with Emma.

“How long till we reach Blackstone?” Emma asked.

“Sundown is in an hour,” Cole answered. “We have a long night of marching ahead of us. But if we keep this pace up, we may arrive before dawn.”

“It was wise to divide the parties,” Heyna said. They had left some of their company behind to rest, including Mrs. Weaver, who was much older, and Lord Blackstar—Heyna and Cole’s father—who was injured. That part of their group would rejoin them at Harbone Citadel. The four friends would press on to Blackstone and try for an agreement with Lord Ronan and his council.

“It was hard for Father,” Cole said, “but he knew it was a good decision. He trusts you, Your Highness.”

“The idea for dividing our company came from an adventure Jo and I had with Captain Helmer, Heyward, Captain Frye, Owen and Studge from the Bracers, and some others,” Emma said.

“The Bracers,” Cole said, sighing, “an elite band of archers from Halfwind Citadel featuring the victor in the famous Archer’s Cup. What was his name?”

“Jo Shanks?” Heyna asked playfully.

“No,” Cole said, scratching his head, “it was definitely someone else who won. Another rabbit entirely—someone not named Jo or Shanks, or Jo Shanks.”

“Nate Flynn,” Jo said, smiling. “And he deserved it.”

“Do you ever wish you could have another shot at glory like that, Jo, another Archer’s Cup?” Heyna asked.

Jo shook his head and assumed a disinterested posture, pausing to look off into the distance like a ruminating scholar. “Bah. Such things are . . . definitely *not* beneath me,” he said, now



smirking at them. “I would love another chance. But Nate did deserve it. And he’s a top archer. Maybe the best in Natalia.”

“I’m glad to know you’ve still got that spirit, Jo,” Emma said.

“Please don’t encourage him, Your Highness,” Cole said.

“Cole, you’re going to have to call me Emma when it’s just us. And it’s just us four, now. We are cousins, after all.”

“It’s hard for me,” Cole replied, his voice pitched deeper, “but I know it’s a good decision. I trust you, Emma.”

Heyna laughed at Cole’s imitation of his father, but Jo objected. “Hey, I was calling you Emma before you even knew these two—back when you didn’t know you were royalty.”

“Jo, Jo, my old pal of many adventures and not my cousin,” Emma said, “you may address my person as ‘Your Royal Highness, may she ever be elevated above me and highly exalted.’”

“That’s a mouthful,” Jo said.

“That’s a mouthful...?” Emma questioned, waving him on with an overly elegant hand motion while her face took on a prim pout.

“That’s a mouthful . . . Your Royal Highness . . . may she never be smellervated below me and generally revolting.” Jo turned to Cole, whispering loudly. “How’d I do?”

“Pretty close,” Cole mock-whispered back for all to hear.

“Jo, you’re a scoundrel, and your attempted jokes greatly displease my royal personage,” Emma said, maintaining her lofty tone. “When we reach our destination, remind me to have you assigned to the most dangerous post in the army.”

“I’ve already got it,” Jo replied. “This banter is nearly killing me.”

They moved on, silent for a while, as the sun sank lower. The darkness came, and they all followed closely behind Cole. Heyna stayed just ahead of Emma, and Jo guarded the rear, bow in hand and arrows ever at the ready.

When they stopped for a break, Jo and Cole did a quick perimeter check while Emma rested. Jo spoke quietly. “Cole, you think you’ll ever marry?”

“I don’t know,” Cole replied, taken aback. “I haven’t thought too much about it. I guess I always thought that was something for after the war. After we win. You?”

“I do think about it. Sometimes I wonder if we wait till the war’s over, then maybe we’ll never leave room for it. We spend so much time fighting in this war; maybe we should fight for love just as fiercely.”

“I’ve never heard you talk like this.”

“I think this war has made me bolder. Everything feels, I don’t know, pretty urgent.”

“Oh.” Cole smiled as he looked back to the spot where the princess rested, guarded closely by Heyna. “Is it Emma?”

“No, no,” Jo said quickly. “I think that’s impossible for lots of reasons. One, she’s the heir, and she probably needs to marry some great lord or prince or—”

“A heroic archer who proves himself in battle?” Cole interrupted.

“It’s not her, Cole,” Jo said, shaking his head. “I think you saw how she came to life with Lord Booker’s son, Morgan, back at Vandalia Citadel. I think her heart is set elsewhere, if anywhere at all.”

Cole nodded; then a grave look came over his face. He glared at Jo.

Jo laughed. “No, it’s not your sister, either. Heyna’s too much like a sister to me. No, it’s no

one I know. It's just the possibility of someone. The hope, I guess."

Cole nodded. "That's a relief. I definitely prefer your imaginary sweetheart to my sister any day."

Laughing, they reunited with Emma and Heyna and, after a short rest, continued their march. As the night wore on, Jo's feet began to ache, and his vision occasionally blurred. He believed Emma's plan, adopted after Heyna's suggestion and his own agreement, was a good one. They intended to reach Blackstone Citadel before they were expected, surprising Lord Ronan. Ronan had also failed to acknowledge Emma's brother, Prince Smalden, before her. Reliable word had come that the prince, whom his friends called Smalls, had been killed in battle. Emma—who had only learned her true identity recently—was the heir now, and the burden was no doubt very heavy on her.

Jo eased up beside Emma. "Do you think you can turn Lord Ronan?"

"I have to," Emma replied. "We need his army. We need every citadel's army, or we've lost before we even get to First Warren."

"So much has to go right," Jo said. "Us at Blackstone, Lord Blackstar and Mrs. Weaver