



THE LOST KEY

S. D. SMITH

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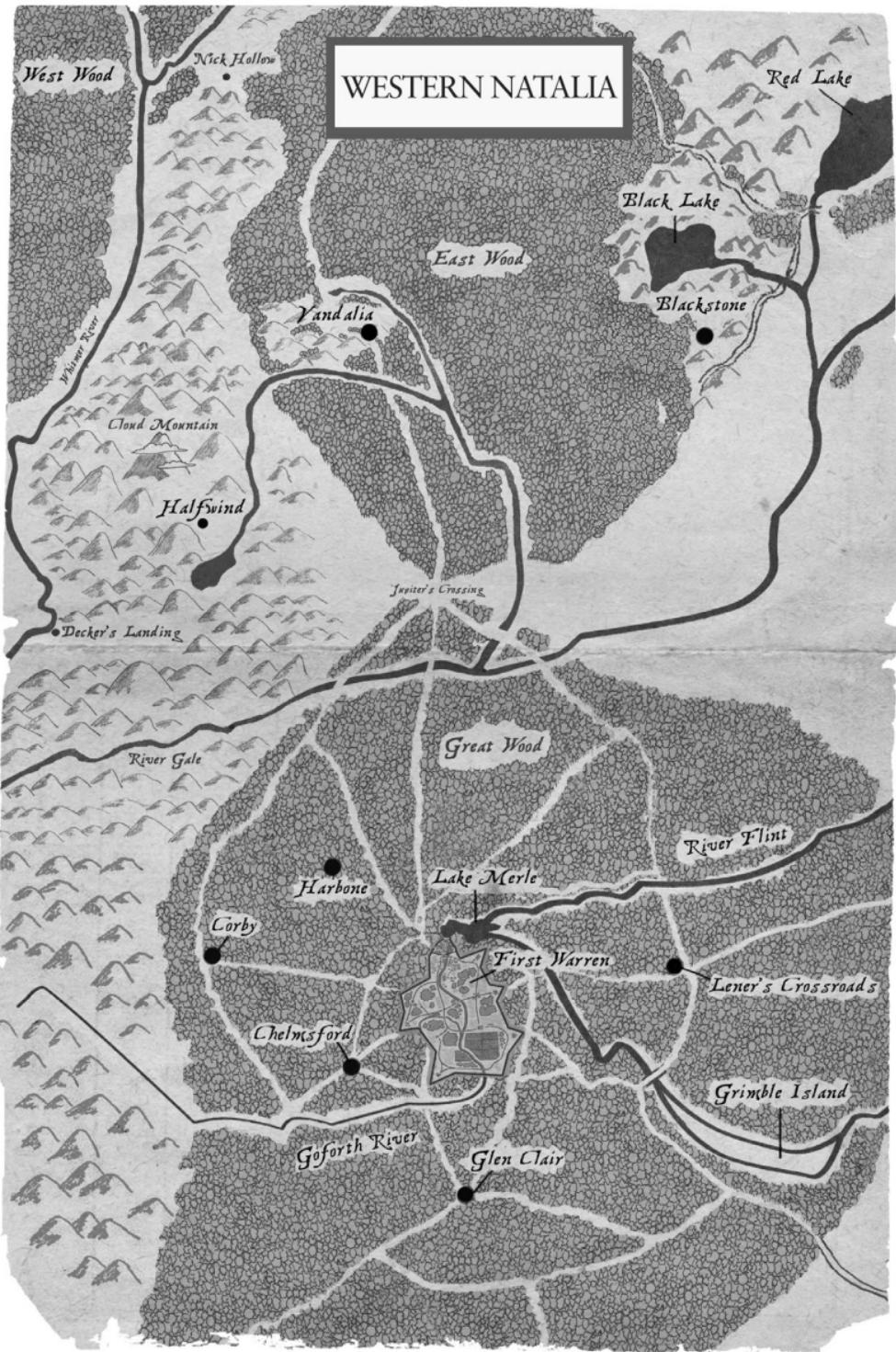
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WESTERN NATALIA





A NOTE FROM S. D. SMITH

You have found yourself some Lost Tales, and I hope you enjoy them! *Them*. Yes, there are two lost tales in this volume, and they are set at very different times. The first story, *The Lost Key*, is set after *The Green Ember* and before *Ember Falls*. This is a time when the Longtreaders and their friends had moved from Cloud Mountain to Halfwind Citadel, but before the arrival of the Silver Prince. If we include the Green Ember: Archer books—and we should, they are must-reads for Green Ember fans—then this takes place after *The Last Archer* and *The First Fowler*. When you turn the page, you can see this laid out pretty clearly.

My advice is this. Don't read *The Lost Key* until after you read *The Green Ember*. Always start with *The Green Ember*. And don't read *Helmer's Son* (the second story in this volume) until you've read *The Green Ember*, *Ember Falls*, *Ember Rising*, and *Ember's End*.

One question you will have after reading both stories (or either) is the same question I always get—in fan mail, at book signings, and when I bump into readers at the cookie store: Will there be more? Lord willing, I am planning to write and share more Green Ember adventures. So, yes.

2025 marks ten years since *The Green Ember* was first published and I'm so happy to have a new book to share on such a special occasion. Thank you for going on these adventures with me and my family.

Godspeed and, as always...

I'm on your side,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "S.D. Smith". The signature is fluid and cursive, with "S.D." on the left and "Smith" on the right, connected by a horizontal line.



Chapter 1

PICKET'S CHASE

Picket Longtreader sped along the Halfwind Citadel passage, eyes locked on the black-clad buck racing away.

“Help me! Stop him!” Picket shouted, pointing at the fleeing rabbit. An elderly merchant pushing a small cart through the hallway backed up as Picket’s quarry sped past and darted around a corner.

“I’m sorry!” the old merchant gasped, voice cracking as his hand went to his heart.

Picket took the turn, shaving the inside edge of the wall, and dug into the chase. He was convinced the masked bandit was guilty of stealing a set of costly tools and stashing them in



his pack. Even now, Picket could hear the metallic clanging of the crucial blacksmithing hardware in the fleeing thief's tight-slung satchel. The precious equipment was desperately needed by the Halfwind smithy as it prepared for the brewing war. "Help me! Stop that thief!" Picket shouted, as the swift robber dodged through a team of nurses escorting patients down the corridor.

It was too late again. Reaching to steady their unstable patients, the nurses could not react in time to stick out a foot to trip him up.

"Sorry!" a pretty doe called, sighing as the young hero sped by.

Picket focused his attention ahead, on the long corridor and the twists and turns coming up. It hadn't taken him long to work out the mazy insides of this complex warren, despite the complaints of some of his friends who were also new here. Now, with his gaze tracking the buck racing ahead of him, he had worked out several different possibilities for his flight based upon whether or not this rabbit was native to Halfwind. Picket squinted as he ran. *If he's native, he'll take a left here.* Picket was betting the buck would, if he was from Halfwind, get to a gate quickly and hope to lose his pursuer in the twisting, tangled paths outside the secret citadel.

He didn't. Instead, he darted right into a stairwell that led down deep into the lower levels. Picket grinned and plunged ahead. He hit the descending stairwell and leapt down half a flight of steps, then dashed on, taking the remaining stairs in bounding jumps. He caught sight of the thief racing through an arched doorway and ran through himself. Picket had gained on him. He smiled as he raced on. The fleeing buck careened around a corner and smashed into a pack of robed votaries, ruining their ritual walk. The votaries were knocked to the ground in a

cascading fall, the candle-bearer touching flame to his neighbour's robe, setting off a scramble to pat down the fire while the baffled brother scooted away in concussed confusion.

"Help me! Stop that thief!" Picket cried, then placed his hand over his mouth as he was aware he was shouting in the vicinity of their sacred Leaper's Hall. Wincing, he slowed to pick his way through the sprawling brothers, while the thief, balancing against a stone archway, dug in again and prepared to sprint away. "Pardon me," Picket said, stepping carefully as he neared his quarry. Now close enough, he dived and stretched out for the thief's trailing leg. His hand touched fur but couldn't find purchase as the buck slipped away.

A clever brother darted out a foot and tripped the thief, but he rose and raced on before Picket could get up. The advantage was gone, and the distance Picket had made up was lost again. Rushing past the ornate doorway into Leaper's Hall, Picket hurried ahead with a feeling of imminent failure. He was so far back now! A clever turn by his target, and he would disappear.

Picket watched the bandit rush right into the hospital wing, and his hopes rose for a moment.

He knew that area very well. His sister, Heather, was working there. She was an apprentice to Emma, their dear friend who had just returned from an assignment at Harbone Citadel. Picket rushed down the long corridor, with concern growing that his loved ones might be hurt.

There was a loud crashing sound, a clanging that echoed and joined the noise of shouts. The thief staggered out of the hospital entrance, hands protecting his head as bottles and pans crashed and clanged around him. He ducked and dodged as Emma emerged, swinging her satchel at the intruder. “What are you thinking!” Emma shouted, her aim true as the stumbling buck cowered and tried to find his feet. “We’ve got patients sleeping in here, you villain! Get out of my hospital!”

The buck’s eyes, the only visible part of his face, widened, and he turned, tripping till he found his stride again and rushed off.

Picket smiled. Speeding ahead while Emma assaulted the intruder, he had regained his lost distance and was once again closing fast. He reached Emma, who was shaking her head. He waved as he sped past and heard her mutter.

“The company you keep, Shuffler.”

Picket was nearly caught up again and was glad to see the thief speed up another stairwell. But Picket didn't make up any more ground going upwards, and the bandit burst through another arched opening and sped off in the direction of the barracks and mess hall. The barracks made Picket think of his pal and fellow Fowler Jo Shanks. Jo was a great fighter and one of the finest archers in all Natalia. Jo, or even a less gifted soldier, would be more help in this chase than a merchant, votary, or doctor. A soldier would see what was happening and stop the fleeing buck. Picket gazed down the long corridor and hoped to see Jo or another soldier appear. But none did. That's when he remembered. *They're all at the muster!*

It was an opportune time for the thief to act since most of the soldiers stationed in the warren were out on Westfield mustering in divisions to be reviewed by Captain Frye and the prince. Most of the bucks were attached to a military division, so much of the work had stopped. But the essential tasks at the forge went on, and the blacksmiths were excused from the muster. However, many of the smiths were at the mess hall at this moment. Picket had been sent to find

his friend Heyward when he saw the thief rush away from old Halto Smith, who was locking up the most crucial tools in the forge's hold.

Now Picket was tiring, the chase having taken him all over the sprawling warren. He shouted again, "Help me! Stop that thief!" but his weary call fell flat against the earthen walls of the long corridor, and his energy was fading fast. The thief rushed on, widening his distance from Picket, and he dashed into a room Picket had never been in before. Picket breathed deep as he reached the doorway, hoping it was the only way out and he need only bar the door. Rushing in, he discovered it was a private dining area. Several families sat at table while a grey, ancient matron brought in a platter of bowls of delicious-smelling soup to serve a group made up mostly of very young bucks and does. The thief leapt onto the table, kicking dishes as he rushed for the far open door that led to a kitchen. The children screamed and the matron's eyes widened in fury as the thief destroyed their meal. She quickly pitched the contents off the platter and hurled the silver tray as the bandit leapt from the table. The platter smacked the

back of his head, and he tripped forwards through the door, a cry of pain trailing away as he disappeared.

Picket called, “I’m sorry,” as he carefully rushed across the table and followed through the door.

“That’ll learn ya!” the matron cried, furious. “Thumped him a good’ern,” she added.

Picket barely heard as he ran on. The thief was rubbing his head, but he hadn’t slowed down much. This kitchen led to the larger mess hall, and Picket was soon chasing the thief across the near-empty hall. The smiths ate on the far side of the room and didn’t even rise when the two rabbits ran across. Picket shouted, “Help me! Stop him!” in breathless desperation, but the smiths laughed.

“Get him!” one shouted, cackling and slapping his neighbour.

Another called, “Stole your best dress, has he?” and they all laughed loudly and dug back into their meal.

Picket followed his quarry through the mess hall doorway and into another long corridor. This one split two ways, and Picket hoped desperately that the thief would go right. The



lefthand corridor would take him to a series of hallways ideal for evading escape, and Picket believed he had no chance of catching him that way. The right led to a gate with a portcullis—a strong wooden gate held up by a stout rope. That gate also led to Westfield, where Picket could possibly get some help. Still, the right side provided no sure thing. If he made it past the gate, he could easily be lost in a maze of paths before Picket could summon assistance. Which way would he go?

Reaching the corridor's T, the thief hesitated a moment. He began left, and Picket's heart sank. Then he changed course abruptly and ran hard to the right. Picket, lungs on fire, dug in for one last leg of the chase. If he could reach the thief before the portcullis—or, better yet, if the portcullis was closed—there was a chance.

They ran on, and weariness dragged at Picket. *Go on! Push on!* He pushed on, and they drew near the last bend in the way. Rounding it, he saw that the portcullis gate was wide open.

No!

Picket winced but hurried on, hoping his enemy might trip. *If only I had some help!* As the thief neared the last gate to escape, he shot a backwards glance that Picket was convinced held a triumphant grin behind the mask. Picket despaired and slowed down, his lungs burning and his heart beating out of his chest. The thief would get away.

Then he spotted a form slumped in a chair about fifty yards from the portcullis gate. *Jo? Jo! “Jo!”*

The form came to life, and Jo Shanks lifted his head in groggy confusion. “Huh? Hey, what?”



“Jo!” Picket shouted, resuming his chase.
“Help me stop him!”

Jo teetered on his stool, wiping his face as Picket neared. The exhausted archer

blinked heavily and then came awake and alert. “Stop him?”

“Yes, help me stop him!” Picket cried as he blew past his friend.

The thief was near freedom now, and Picket was angry that the lanky archer wasn’t rushing after him. *We’re going to lose him!* “Help me stop him!” Picket cried again.

Picket glanced back and saw Jo raise his bow and draw an arrow. He effortlessly aimed and shot. The bolt sped past both racing rabbits and hit the hefty rope holding up the portcullis. The rope parted, and the gate fell hard, slamming down with a thud. The speeding thief slid into a collision with the thick gate. Trapped and gasping, the bandit turned back and drew his sword. Another arrow zipped in and knocked the sword free from the masked buck’s grip. Picket rushed ahead, then slowed as he drew closer to the trapped buck. A last arrow flew past Picket and pinned the thief to the wooden gate by his black cloak. He struggled for a moment and then gave up, hanging his head.

Picket came close, drawing his sword. He turned from the trapped buck back to Jo. “Never mind, Jo. I got him.”