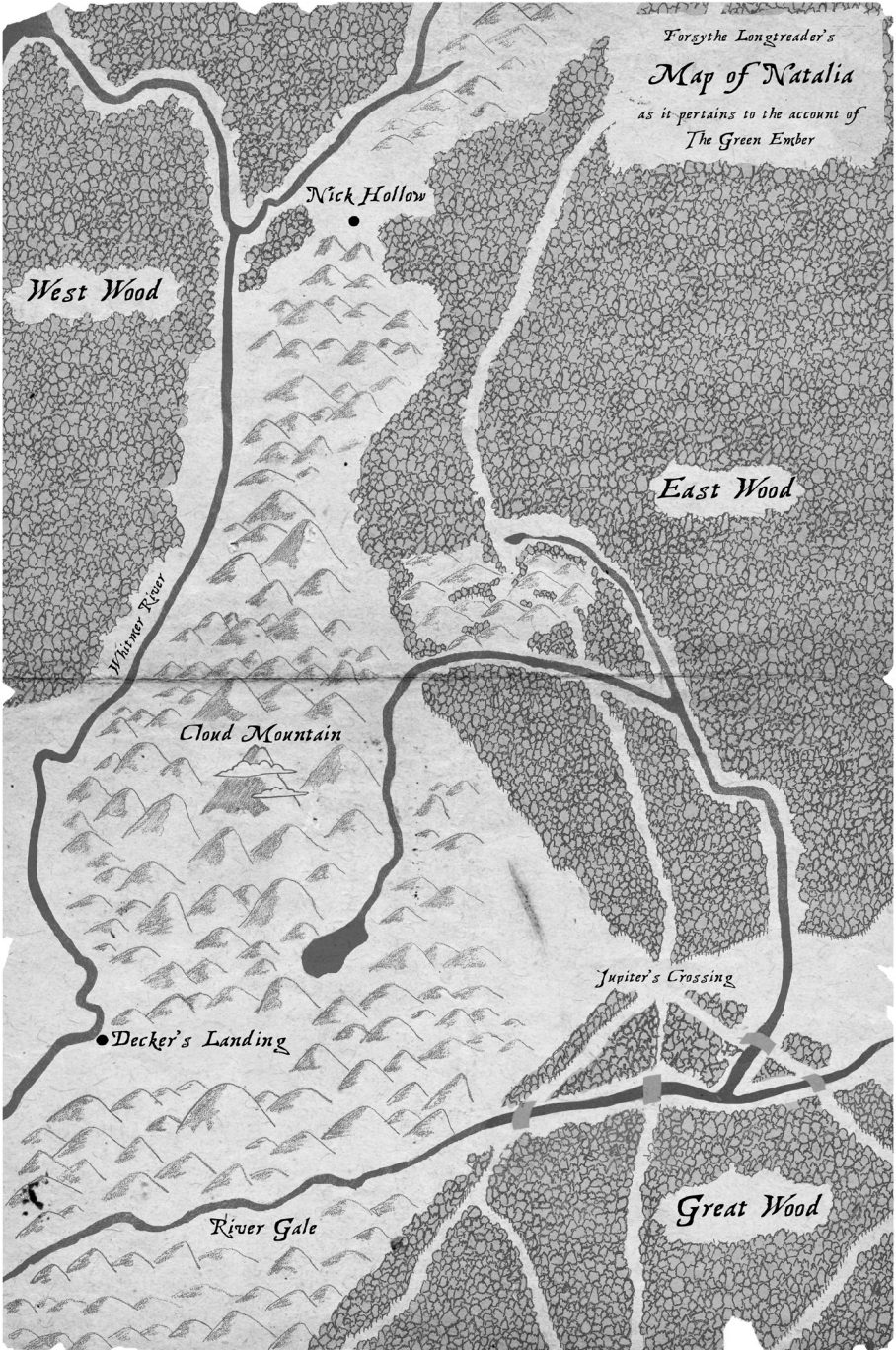


Forsythe Longreader's
Map of Natalia
as it pertains to the account of
The Green Ember





Chapter One

HEATHER AND PICKET CATCH A STAR

Heather had invented the game, but Picket made it magic. She remembered the day it began. She had been out in the meadow behind their elm-tree home, lying on a blanket in the sun. Heather was little then. Her long furry ears bent slightly in the wind, and the bow she invariably wore over one ear was starting to come undone. That day Mother had done a carnation bow, an intricate weave of one long ribbon made to look like a large flower, and pinned it to one ear. Picket was little more than a baby then, sleeping in his crib.

Heather had gathered several sticks and was thinking hard about them when a powerful gust of wind almost knocked her over. The gust finally loosened her bow, which came down in a tangle of scarlet ribbon, draping over the sticks she held. She was unaware that she held the ingredients for a game that would later give them endless hours of fun.

She had crossed two short sticks and made an X shape. Then she added another, giving it six points. She tied them together with the long scarlet ribbon. Heather smiled. It

was pretty, like a star. The end of the ribbon trailed back a few feet, and she considered wrapping all of it around the bound pointed sticks. But she stopped suddenly, and then the wind picked up again as she tied off the ribbon around the star at its center, leaving its long scarlet train to flap in the breeze. She stood, holding her small invention aloft, smiling wide. With barely a thought of why, she flung the toy as hard as she could. It sailed through the air like a shooting star, the ribbon trailing a scarlet wake. It disappeared into the tall grass. She frowned, afraid it would take forever to find it.

That's when the game came to her. When Picket woke up, she explained it to him, hoping he would crawl out and play. But he was too little then.

"It's called Starseek," she said, "and this is the star."

"Is it a real star?" Picket asked, his head cocked sideways and his whiskers twitching.

"No, little one," Heather said, "a real star hangs in the sky at night, along with a million others. This is just a game."

"A game?" Picket said. "Maybe they're all for games."

Now that they were both older, Heather near maturity and Picket not too far behind, the two of them had played Starseek hundreds of times. It had been fun to play alone for a little while, but that got old pretty quickly. So Picket had played, with Heather's patient instruction, from the time he could walk. Now he was older and, as much as Heather hated to admit it, getting as good as her at the game she had invented. He had a keen eye and was agile on the ground.

She was faster. She could still beat him at a straight-run race, but he was quick.

Today she was in danger of losing every match. But it wasn't over yet.

Picket flung the star, and it sailed, red ribbon against blue sky, far into the meadow. Finally falling, it disappeared into the tall golden grass. The moment it touched down, they were off.

Picket darted back and forth amid the tall grass. He had an uncanny knack for doing a sort of quick maths in his mind, and his estimations were almost always spot-on. He liked to stay low, close to the ground. But Heather's chance lay in her experience and flat-out speed.

She bolted for the spot she was sure the star must be, running full-out, heedless of the hidden dangers that might send her sprawling. Let Picket dart back and forth all he wanted, dodging roots and stumps. She would fly.

Heather sailed up and over the grass with each leap, rebounding to soar once more above the heavy kernelled tips. She loved the feeling of the wind pushing against the fur of her face and her long soft ears. She was marveling at the power in her legs and feet, thrilled with the feel of the wind against her face, when she struck a stone, well-hidden in the thickest part of the grass. She lost her balance and fell hard, rolling several times. *Surely it's over now.*

Heather popped up quickly and stretched her long neck to look around. She ignored the pain in her leg; she could tell it wasn't serious enough to stop. She saw grass giving

way in a zigzag to her left and knew Picket was closing in on the star. She quickly scanned the grass ahead, hoping to catch any evidence of the star's entry.

She saw it before he did, but he was closer, tacking back and forth. He stopped and popped his head up, trying to peer above the tall grass. He saw it and quickly swiveled to see where Heather was.

By then, she was already pounding toward the target.

Just the delay I need.

Heather never stopped, but their eyes met. She saw Picket's eyes narrow, his whiskers twitch, and his brows furrow. He launched into the effort.



It was going to be close.

He led 2 to 0, and if he got the star this time, the match was over. Heather put all her energy into the last few feet, determined to snatch victory away from this young upstart. She smiled.

Picket was closing fast, she saw, faster than she expected. She watched him coil for the final spring at the star. He lunged for it, propelled through the air like a skipping stone rising from the dimpled surface of a lake. His hand opened to grab the star.

Heather's hand closed on it a moment sooner. They collided in the air, rolling over and over in a blurry heap of fur and red ribbon.

Heather bounced up first, her fist clenching the star.

Picket rubbed his head and leaned on his elbow. "That," he began, pausing to catch his breath, "was amazing."

"It was," Heather agreed, panting and trying not to giggle. "Closest finish ever, Picket."

"Yeah," he agreed, gasping for air and grinning wide. "That was even closer than the infamous Snow Match of last winter."

She laughed, remembering. That had been a cold, crazy day.

But this day was fine. There was no snow, no chill, nothing whatsoever to dampen their joy. At least, not yet.

Heather glanced at the sky over East Wood. Purple clouds pulsed with irregular stabs of light in the distance. A rolling rumble signaled the storm's approach. Pretty fast

approach, if she knew anything. She looked away. After all, it was still sunny here, at least for the moment.

“Great match, Heather,” Picket said, rising to his feet. “You were going faster than I’ve ever seen you.”

“Thanks,” she said. “But you still have the lead.”

“Let it fly,” he said, eager for a chance to win the overall match.

She leaned into it, her heart still racing, and flung the star with all her strength. It took flight, sailing high into the sky, its red trail rippling in the wind. The game depended on each player throwing it as hard as he or she could and both standing still until it landed.

The rabbits watched, eyes tracking the red ribbon, while their bodies prepared to bolt as soon as it disappeared in the grass. As soon as it landed.

But it didn’t land.

The breeze caught it up, and it sailed wide to their right and stuck high in the branches of the old maple tree that bent on the edge of East Wood.

“I can’t believe this,” Picket said, kicking a stone. Thunder boomed in the distance.

“Let’s go see if we can get it,” Heather said.

Picket frowned but followed behind his sister.

They weren’t allowed to go past this tree to the east. They could go into West Wood, sure. But Father had strictly warned them never to go past this maple tree, never to come a step closer to East Wood. He had also told them to run full speed back to the house if they ever heard anything

whatsoever from the eastern forest, even as small as a twig snapping. So, on top of their game being delayed or ruined, they had to go near the creepiest place they knew.

They crossed to the meadow's edge quickly, an eye on the approaching storm. Heather looked up at the tangled mess of the maple tree. Its limbs stretched out like the brittle arms of a lanky monster; its hollow middle was a crevice of decay.

It was a young tree, nowhere near as big as the wide elm the rabbits made their home in. But the monster maple was dying. This seemed wrong to Heather, but Father had confirmed it.

"Yes, it's a very young tree. But it won't last two more winters. It's doomed," he had said while walking with them last year in the spring, "just like everything in the east. It used to be alive and beautiful. But now it's bent, dangerous, and dying."

Heather had felt a chill as he said this, a rare display of sadness by their father. But, come to think of it, Heather thought she could see this more and more in him. Was Father getting sadder, or was she just getting old enough to see it? She hadn't asked him then, or since, the questions that continued to bubble up in her mind: *Where are we from? Why did we come here?*

She knew that Father was from the east and that none of Mother's family still lived in Nick Hollow. But any time the subject of their moving to Nick Hollow—far away from almost everyone—came up, her parents grew sad, grave, and silent. She had learned to leave those questions unasked.

They reached the roots of the maple tree and stared up at the tangle of ribbon that surrounded their star.

“We could make another,” Picket said, looking from side to side.

Heather knew why he was nervous.

“That ribbon isn’t so easy to find, Picket,” she said. “We can get it if we work together.”

“You know I’m scared of heights,” he said. “There’s no point in teasing me.”

“I’m not teasing you,” Heather said, snapping back. “I just think you need to get over it. We’re not that far away from being old enough to be on our own, Pick.”

“I’m sorry I can’t be as grown-up and brave as Heather the Magnificent,” he said.

“Let me boost you up,” she said, fighting off the urge to really sting him with her words. She cast an uneasy eye at the forest, which lay just a few yards away down a gentle slope. She found a good spot and folded her hands together, making a place for Picket’s foot to step up and reach the lowest limb. From there, she knew, he should be able to reach the next limb and climb up carefully to reach the star.

She watched him hesitate, first glancing at the wood with a wince, then looking up fearfully at where the star was stuck in the branches. Beyond the branches, the blue sky was turning to purple as charcoal clouds churned above.

Heather could tell that he was embarrassed, that he was fighting off the urge to run away. She felt nervous as well.

This lanky monster of a tree had their star in its heights, and it looked determined to trap them in its branches.

The sky thundered suddenly, an ominous, brooding doom. Heather felt panic growing inside her. “It’s nothing,” she said aloud. “I’m not afraid of this—” But she couldn’t finish her defiant words.

A bone-rattling boom ripped open the sky, sending a jagged javelin of gold crackling down.

The rabbits were knocked back as lightning struck the maple with a deafening crack, followed by a spray of sparks and shards of bark. Lightning ripped through the limbs, circling the brittle trunk of the maple in a braided tangle of fire.

Heather got to her feet, dazed. Her vision cleared. She looked up.

A huge limb, one of the monster maple’s bending arms— heavy and ablaze—cracked off and hurtled toward them. She stole a panicked glance at Picket.

Picket was on his back, eyes closed.

He wasn’t moving.