

a map of
Dang

(Drawn from memory,
since it is difficult to sketch
whilst riding a fendril)

the BLACKWOOD

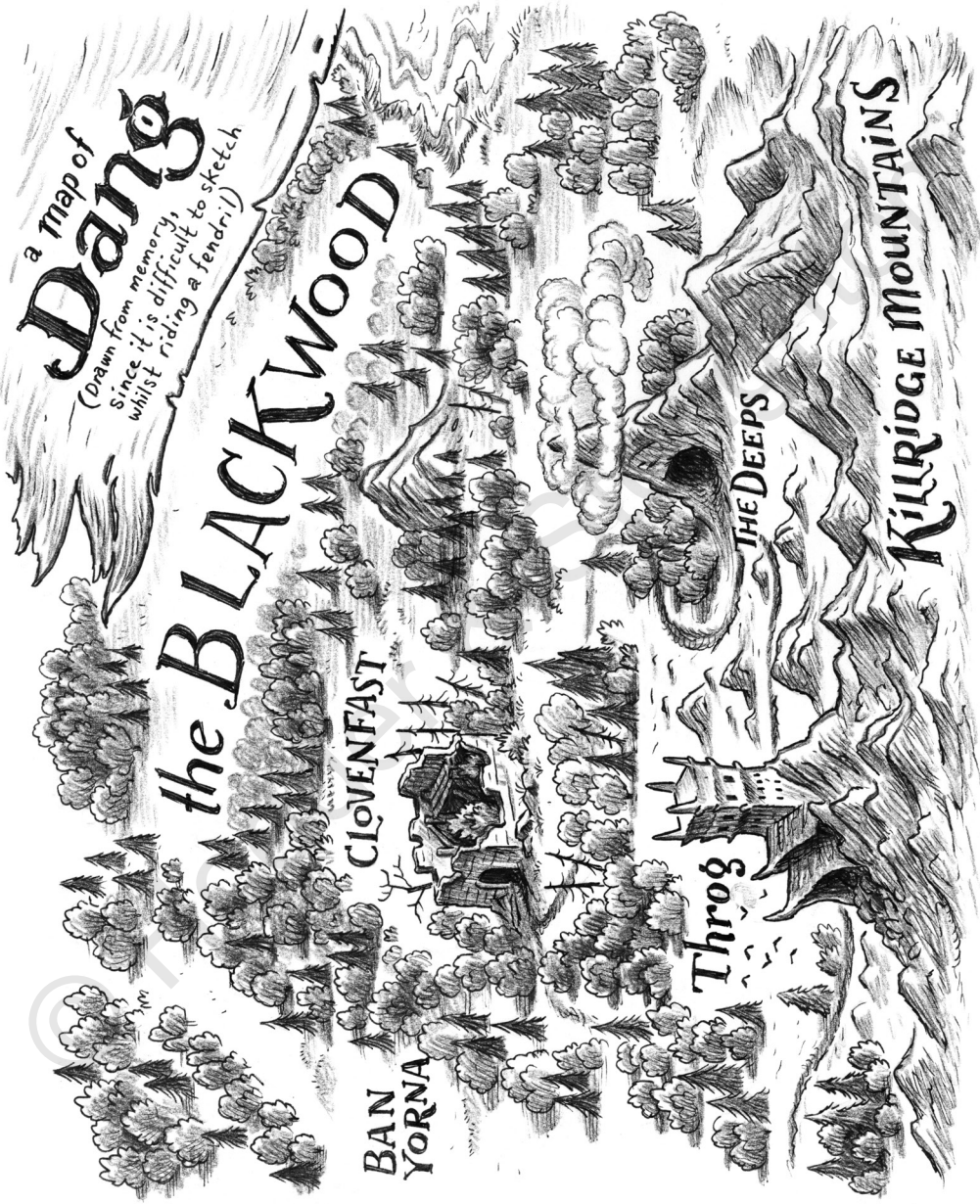
CLOVENFAST

BAN
YORNA

Throg

THE DEEPS

KILLRIDGE MOUNTAINS



Part One:
The Green Hollows

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In the Fourth Epoch, in the year 435, during the peaceful reign of Lander Wingfeather and his wife, Illia Finley of the Green Hollows, a girl was born. Her elder brother Olmer would be the Throne Warden, and the girl was to be the High Queen of the Shining Isle. Her name was Madia, and her beauty was renowned in the free lands of Dang. When she was a young woman of marrying age she paid a summer visit to Ban Rona in the Green Hollows, where King Lander and Queen Illia often sailed when the wind was warm. There they attended the Banick Durga and spent their days in happiness while the Hollowsfolk reveled in gamery. Of all the pleasures of Ban Rona, young Madia most enjoyed stealing away from the games at the Field of Finley to the cavernous halls of the Great Library.

There she met a bright young man named Bonifer Squoon.

—From *The Annieriad: The Fall of the Fourth Epoch*

AS COMPILED BY OSKAR N. RETEEP, ESQ.

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CHIEF LIBRARIAN, HISTORIAN, AND BOOK SMELLER

OF THE GREAT LIBRARY OF BAN RONA

The Slog of War

What happens next?” Kalmar asked.

“How am I supposed to know? I’ve never been in a war,” Janner said.

“But we’ve been here for three hours at least. And we haven’t eaten a thing.”

“Look, all I know is we’re supposed to sit here and be quiet until the tribes are finished pledging—or whatever it’s called. And we’re all hungry, but at least *you* don’t get cold.”

“How many tribes are left?”

“You can count.”

“Wait, how many tribes did we start with?”

“Kal, can you just find some way to be interested in what’s going on? Mama said this hasn’t happened in decades. And they’re here for *you*, after all. The least you can do is show some interest. Shh! Here comes a tribesman.”

Janner and Kalmar sat on a wooden platform overlooking the Field of Finley, now covered with snow. These were the fields, Janner remembered, where many years ago Podo Helmer had won the heart of Wendolyn Igiby by competing in the games of the Banick Durga against the roughest and rowdiest of the Hollowsfolk. But there were no games today. Today was about war. Which meant boredom.

That morning, Nia had woken the brothers in their bedroom at Chimney Hill with the reminder that the day of tribute had come, and that as High King and Throne Warden of Anniera, their presence was required. After a quick breakfast prepared by Podo and Freva, Nia presented the brothers and their sister, Leeli, with formal attire.

Leeli got a white dress lined with burble fur and a gray-speckled coat that

fell about her like a blanket. It was held around her shoulders by a silver brooch in the shape of a beaming star. When Leeli emerged from her bedroom with the dress and robe on, her hair draped over one shoulder and her cheeks burning with the hope of her own beauty, the boys were speechless. Podo, who was wearing an apron and clogging one-legged around the table collecting dirty dishes, looked up and whispered, “Mother moonlight, she’s pretty.”

The brothers got no such compliments, but they felt handsome in their royal clothes. Kalmar needed no coat since he was already covered with silvery brown fur. Instead he wore a black leather vest lined with bloodred fabric, fastened down the front with shiny silver buttons, each of which bore the Annieran dragon—the same insignia Janner had seen on Uncle Artham’s journals back in Glipwood. Nia draped a black cloak over his shoulders and fastened it at the neck with a silver sun. She tried to put a crown on Kal’s head, not an official Annieran crown, she told them, but something she had commissioned from a smith in Ban Rona, a circlet that would at least make him look kingly enough for the ceremony. But after several failed attempts to secure it over his wolf ears, which constantly twitched, Nia decided to forgo the crown, much to Kalmar’s relief.



Finally, Janner was given a black coat of polished leather, with boots and gloves to match. When he pulled the gloves on and wiggled his fingers, he noticed on the back of each hand the same Annieran dragon stitched into the leather with crimson thread.

“Here,” Nia said as she draped a black cloak over Janner’s shoulders. He noticed when she drew near to fasten his brooch—which was in the shape of a crescent moon—that instead of looking up at her, they were eye to eye. “When did you get so tall?” Nia asked quietly. She adjusted his cloak and her hands lingered on his shoulders. “You look like a Throne Warden. Tall and handsome and humble. Keep an eye on Kalmar today. This ceremony is exactly the kind of thing he loathes.”

Janner glanced at Kal, who was hunched over the table, brushing crumbs from breakfast into a little pile, then licking them up.

“Kalmar!” Nia snapped, and he jerked upright and wiped his hands on his



cloak. “Kalmar!” Nia said again, and he grabbed a napkin from the table and cleaned his hands and cloak with a nervous laugh. “Kalmar!” Nia said, snatching the napkin from him. He hadn’t noticed that it was soiled with sweetberry jam—jam that was now smeared all over his new cloak and his hands, which he absentmindedly wiped on his vest.

“Out!” Nia ordered.

Janner hustled Kalmar and Leeli through the door, where Oskar N. Reteep waited with the sled hitched and ready. Kal bounded into the wagon.

“In the words of Chanchó Phanor, ‘You three look magnificent!’ Is that sweetberry jam?” Oskar pointed at Kalmar’s cloak.

Somehow, even though his face was covered in fur, Kal’s cheeks seemed to flush as he reached down and lifted Leeli in behind him. Janner clambered up the other side.

“It’s going to be a fine day, Jewels!” Oskar clicked the horse into motion and pulled his scarf over his mouth. He was already a big fellow, but the many layers of coats, cloaks, and blankets made him look enormous. All Janner could see of the old man was his bright red nose and spectacles peeking out from between the scarf and his cowl; the rest of him was a mountainous pile of blankets.

After an hour of riding through the snow, they crested the hill and saw what seemed to be the entire population of the Green Hollows gathered around the perimeter of the Field of Finley. Out of the silence of the long ride came the sudden racket of the multitude, the whinnies of horses, and the snapping of many flags in the wind. The aroma of campfires mingled with that of meat roasting on spits and the odor of horse manure. Each tribe had erected its own main tent and surrounded it with smaller ones, between which were wagons, horses, and campfires. Thousands of Hollowsfolk stood in groups around the fires. Others had struck up games and were rolling in the snow or chasing one another out beyond the tents.

But the center of the Field of Finley was immaculate, a smooth circular blanket of white as long and wide as an arrowshot. Not a single footprint marred the snow, though the path around it was muddied with traffic. At the

section of the field nearest the road, a platform had been erected, and a man standing beside it raised a hand in greeting when he saw the Wingfeathers. Even at a distance, Janner recognized the tall, bearded figure of Rudric, the Keeper of the Hollows.

Janner felt a tug of grief. Rudric hadn't meant to kill his father, Janner knew that, but it didn't make the pain or the awkwardness disappear—for either Janner or Rudric, who had scarcely been seen at Chimney Hill in the months since Esben's death. Rudric was a good man, and Janner liked him, but he had become an emblem of his father's absence. Janner couldn't imagine how Nia must feel—Nia, who had been in love with Rudric up to the very day that Esben returned.

Oskar grunted. "Right. Well, as some author surely said somewhere, 'We'd better get on with it.'" He drove the sled down to the platform and greeted Rudric.

"Oskar, good to see you," Rudric said. He extended a hand to Leeli, who took it after a slight hesitation and allowed him to lift her out of the wagon and lower her gently to the ground. Then Rudric nodded a greeting to Janner and Kal, though he met their eyes for only a moment. "This way, Wingfeathers. It's going to be a long day, but this is important if we're going to be an army worthy of battle."

Next to the platform was a tent with two Durgan Guildsmen standing guard at the entrance. Their black hoods were pulled low over their faces and their arms were crossed. When Janner and his siblings followed Rudric inside, the guildsmen nodded a silent greeting first at Rudric, then at Janner and Leeli. It was hard to tell if it was his imagination, but Janner didn't think they acknowledged his wolf brother.

He didn't have time to think more about it because as soon as he entered the tent he saw twelve tribesmen and as many tribeswomen standing at attention. They were gathered around a long table beneath the iron branches of a chandelier afflicker with candles. Janner could tell it was meant to resemble the great tree of Ban Rona. He couldn't help noticing the irony that only a few months ago Nia had declared *turalay* and put her bloody handprint on

the tree in order to save Kalmar from the very people who were now pledging their allegiance to him.

Rudric took his place at the head of the table and gestured at three empty seats. “Welcome, clans of the Hollows.” Rudric nodded at the children. “Welcome, Jewels of Anniera.”

Then, at once, everyone in the room sat. The Wingfeather children looked around in confusion, then plopped into their seats.

The men at the table all looked like typical Hollows men: barrel chests, long moustaches and beards, faces and hands that bore knots and scars from years of hard work and harder play. And though their clothes differed in color and cut, they all wore a mixture of burly furs and leather that were well-groomed and threaded with patterns and emblems. The women, on the other hand, could not have looked more varied. Some of them were slim and feminine, like Nia, while others, somehow no less beautiful, hulked like the men. Some wore bright dresses and had swords slung over their backs, and others wore plain cloth but had their hair arranged in looping braids. Some were even burlier than the men, with whiskers and warts as ugly as Olumphia Groundwich’s. They sat beside what Janner assumed to be their husbands and it seemed likely that they had administered the wounds that led to many of the men’s scars—yet most of the couples were, in fact, holding hands.

“For those of you who have not yet laid eyes on him,” Rudric said, “I present to you Kalmar Wingfeather, High King of the Shining Isle.”

Every eye in the room appraised Kalmar without a shred of sensitivity. Most of the faces wore their wariness and distaste plainly, though a few gave him sincere smiles and nods of greeting. Janner noted with pride that Kalmar sat up straight and met their eyes.

“Hello,” he said, clearing his throat. “I’m not sure what to say except, uh, that I’m glad you’re here. I don’t know about you, but my life has been pretty messed up by Gnag the Nameless. Somebody has to stop him or he’s going to basically take over all of Aerwiar and turn everybody into . . . into . . .” He glanced at his claws and furry hands. The tent fell painfully silent. Kalmar drew a deep breath and held his Fang hands out for all to see. “Into this.

Somebody has to stop him. And it doesn't seem like anyone but the people of the Green Hollows are brave enough to fight back. So like I said, I'm glad you're here. That's all." He hid his hands under the table and slumped back in his chair. "Oh, I forgot." Kalmar sat up again. "This is my sister, Leeli. She's a Song Maiden. And my brother, Janner, is the Throne Warden. We don't know what we're supposed to do, but we want to help."

Leeli stared around the table at the Hollowsfolk as if daring them to speak against her brother. After a pause, the clan chiefs and chieftesses grunted their approval and banged on the table with heavy fists so long and loud that Janner thought the table would break.

Rudric quieted the assembly and explained the order of the day, which, as it turned out, would be unbearably boring for all three children. Beneath the twelve clans of the chieftains and chieftesses, there were many separate tribes, and the heads of each tribe, each in their turns, were to come before Kalmar and pledge allegiance to the Shining Isle and its boy king. One clan leader at a time, they marched before the platform on the field. They gave accounts of their clan histories, including tales of greatness in various battles over the centuries, going all the way back to the Second Epoch. Each leader took care to describe his or her clan's particular strengths and weaknesses. After an eternity of what amounted to boasts, tall tales, and bravado, the clan leader would bow, parade the clan's flag first before its chief, then before Kalmar, and then mount it beside the Annieran flag.

Oskar took copious notes. Leeli had brought her songbook and practiced whistleharp fingerings, Janner struggled valiantly to pay attention, and Kalmar did his best to stay awake.

The ceremony droned on for what seemed like an eternity until the head tribesman of Ban Soran swaggered before the platform. He was a wiry fellow who wore no shirt, despite the bitter cold. His chest and face were painted with crimson stripes, and he all but snarled when he spoke.

"My name is Carnack, and I pledge nothing to a Fang of Dang."