

ANDREW PETERSON

THE
WINGFEATHER
SAGA



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PEEK



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PROOF

THE WARDEN
AND THE WOLF KING

BOOK 4

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AND THE WOLF KING



WATERBROOK

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THE WARDEN AND THE WOLF KING

The characters and events in this book are fictional, and any resemblance to actual persons or events is coincidental.

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*This one's for you, dear reader.
You're almost home.*

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*I dreamed of a song—I heard it sung;
In the ear of my soul its strange notes rung.
What were its words I could not tell,
Only the voice I heard right well,*

*A voice with a wild melodious cry
Reaching and longing afar and high.
Sorrowful triumph, and hopeful strife,
Gainful death, and new-born life . . .*

—GEORGE MACDONALD, 1842

Contents

PART ONE: THE GREEN HOLLOW

- One • The Slog of War • 3
- Two • Janner's Pledge • 10
- Three • The Thirteenth Muffin • 14
- Four • Blindplopped • 18
- Five • Thork Whacking • 22
- Six • The Houndry Corps • 27
- Seven • The Call of the Moonraiders • 32
- Eight • Territory Dispute • 38
- Nine • A Fang in the Dungeon • 41
- Ten • The King's Decision • 47
- Eleven • Smells and Sounds and Squealings • 52
- Twelve • The Center of the Storm • 57
- Thirteen • Fighting for Bones • 59
- Fourteen • Another Hollow, Another Monster • 64
- Fifteen • Janner Gets Carried Away • 68
- Sixteen • The Wounded and Woeful • 72
- Seventeen • General Fithyhoop's Scout • 80

Eighteen • The Mystery of the Dream-Window Thing • 85

Nineteen • What Kalmar Saw • 91

Twenty • What Leeli Felt • 97

Twenty-One • What Janner Heard • 103

Twenty-Two • Leeli's Secret Weapon • 107

Twenty-Three • The Batwhacker of Ban Rona • 111

Twenty-Four • Visitors at Chimney Hill • 114

PART TWO: SKREE

Twenty-Five • The Flabbit's Paw • 122

Twenty-Six • Snoot's Livery and Cupcakes • 126

Twenty-Seven • Villainous Wretchedness • 133

Twenty-Eight • Groaches in the Sewer • 138

Twenty-Nine • A Moon in the Dark • 142

Thirty • Into the Burrows • 147

Thirty-One • Fangs in the Streets • 152

Thirty-Two • The Weaver Family Reunion • 158

Thirty-Three • Maraly's Name • 164

Thirty-Four • Artham's Shame • 170

Thirty-Five • General Borley's Plan • 174

Thirty-Six • Too Good Not to Be True • 179

Thirty-Seven • Dugtowners at the Riverfront • 182

Thirty-Eight • The Roof of Flombode's Seedery • 187

Thirty-Nine • Strander, Birdman, Florid Sword • 191

Forty • Parley • 196

Forty-One • Story Time with Artham • 200

Forty-Two • Beholding the Dawn • 206

Forty-Three • The Glipwood Township • 211

Forty-Four • Peet's Castle • 219

Forty-Five • Found and Lost • 223

PART THREE: THROG

Forty-Six • A Poet of Plontst • 230

Forty-Seven • A Toothy Stampede • 236

Forty-Eight • Elder Cadwick • 239

Forty-Nine • Cave Paintings • 244

Fifty • Arundelle • 250

Fifty-One • The Cloven Queen's Counsel • 256

Fifty-Two • Into the Blackwood • 260

Fifty-Three • The Angry Ones Attack • 265

Fifty-Four • The Pain of Remembrance • 271

Fifty-Five • Oskar Suggests a Song • 278

Fifty-Six • Kicking Despair in the Rump • 282

Fifty-Seven • Songs to Play, Battles to Fight • 287

- Fifty-Eight • Leeli's War • 294
- Fifty-Nine • Swallowed by the Deeps • 298
- Sixty • The Fang Attacks • 303
- Sixty-One • Alone in the Deeps of Throg • 305
- Sixty-Two • The Queue of Destruction • 309
- Sixty-Three • The Making of Grimgar • 314
- Sixty-Four • The Ancient Stone • 318
- Sixty-Five • Under the Keeper's Cowl • 321
- Sixty-Six • Vooming the Shaft • 325
- Sixty-Seven • Outside Leeli's Window • 330
- Sixty-Eight • The Skreean Fleet • 334
- Sixty-Nine • Bargaining with a Fang • 336
- Seventy • The Crag at Castle Rock • 340
- Seventy-One • Spidifer • 344
- Seventy-Two • "Rain and Fire" • 348
- Seventy-Three • Across the Chasm • 353

PART FOUR: ANNIERA

- Seventy-Four • Gnag the Nameless • 364
- Seventy-Five • The Isle of Anniera • 371
- Seventy-Six • The Fane of Fire • 378
- Seventy-Seven • Stealing the Stone • 383

- Seventy-Eight • Gnag’s Plan • 386
- Seventy-Nine • The Dark Alliance • 391
- Eighty • The Melding • 398
- Eighty-One • The Destruction of Ban Rona • 403
- Eighty-Two • The Battle Begins • 408
- Eighty-Three • Hulwen’s Healing • 415
- Eighty-Four • Beloved • 421
- Eighty-Five • Aftermath • 427
- Eighty-Six • Murgah and the Stone • 434
- Eighty-Seven • Mercy • 441
- Eighty-Eight • Sailing Home • 446
- Eighty-Nine • The Maker • 453
- Ninety • The Coming of the King • 460
- Ninety-One • The King’s Offer • 467
- Ninety-Two • Sailing Home (Again) • 470
- Ninety-Three • Morning at the Castle Rysen • 476
- Ninety-Four • The Seed Is Planted • 481
- Ninety-Five • The Price of Healing • 484
- Ninety-Six • The Former Fangs Have Passed Away • 488
- Epilogue • 492
- Acknowledgments • 494

a map of
Dang

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

the **BLACKWOOD**

CLOVENFAST

**BAN
YORNA**

Throg

THE DEEPS

KILLRIDGE MOUNTAINS

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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.

APPRECIATOR OF THE STRANGE, THE NEAT, AND/OR THE YUMMY

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



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SNEAK PEEK



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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 Chanco 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."

Janner's Pledge

Oy,” said Rudric under his breath. “I was afraid this might happen.”

“What happens if he won't pledge?” Janner asked. Rudric didn't hear him because he was whispering something to the chieftain of Ban Soran.

“What's going on?” Kalmar asked with a yawn.

“Didn't you hear what that guy said?”

“I wasn't listening.”

Carnack still stood before the platform, with his fists on his hips and his nose in the air. Rudric stood and addressed him. “Carnack of Ban Soran! I haven't seen you for a while. Your chieftain tells me you've been patrolling the southern foothills of the Killridges. Is that true?”

“It is,” he said with a snarl.

“Then you have seen Fangs, have you not? And you have fought them?”

“Aye. And they've killed my kinsmen. Evil they are, through and through, and I'll not bow to one today or ever.”

Rudric glanced at Kalmar, who was paying full attention for the first time. “Then what is your challenge, Carnack?” Rudric asked.

“No challenge, Keeper. I'll fight in your war. I just don't want to pledge my clan's blood and bone to a Fang of Dang. If I fight, I fight for the Hollows, not for a monster.”

Janner saw the chieftains and chieftesses shifting uncomfortably. The whole point of the ceremony was to unite the clans under the Annieran flag. Carnack was a splinter in that unity—and a splinter could easily grow into a wedge. Carnack's chief, Horgan Flannery, addressed his tribesman.

“Carnack, ye fool! Seven tribes have pledged without incident. Why

must you be the sore tooth? Do it in the name of the Shining Isle, if not its king. We have a long history with that kingdom, and I mean to preserve it.”

“Come, Carnack.” Rudric held out a hand. “For the sake of our strength.”

“No.” Carnack folded his arms and looked away. “I pledge nothing to no Fang.”

Leeli put her whistleharp away and leaned over to the boys. “Kal, this would be a good time to do something.”

“But what?”

“You could fight him,” Janner suggested. “That seems to be how Hollowsfolk work stuff out. See?” He pointed at Rudric, who was barely restraining Horgan Flannery from leaping off the stage and pummeling Carnack.

“Look at that guy!” Kalmar whispered. “He’d destroy me.”

“No he wouldn’t,” Leeli said. “You’re stronger and faster than any of these people.”

Kalmar sighed and shook his head. “I hate this stuff.”

In one swift motion he leapt from the platform and landed just a few feet in front of Carnack. There was a gasp from Rudric, Horgan, and the rest of the chieftains. Carnack sprang into a fighting stance and backed away, sword in hand. For the first time that day, the perfect snow of the Field of Finley was marked with footprints.

But Kalmar drew no sword, for he had none to draw. Nor did he circle the warrior as if he wanted to attack. He merely stood before him in the snow, his black cloak hanging about him like a shadow.

“What’s your game, wolf?” Carnack spat.

“I don’t have a game.” Kalmar spread his hands to show that he held no weapon. “I just want Gnag the Nameless to lose. Don’t you?”

“I do,” said Carnack after a pause. His sword dropped a few inches.

“Janner, the flag,” Leeli whispered, pointing at the Annieran flag behind them.

He understood in an instant what she meant. Janner removed the Annieran flag, then helped Leeli to her feet. The Throne Warden and the Song Maiden stepped down from the platform and joined Kalmar on the snow.

Carnack looked at the three children uncertainly. Conscious of the eyes of every warrior present, Janner planted the Annieran flag in the snow and knelt, pulling Kalmar down with him.

“If you won’t fight for the Shining Isle,” Janner called out so all could hear, “then let it be known that the Shining Isle fights for you.” He stared at the snow and waited for some response. All he heard was the flutter of the flag in the cold wind.

“What say you, Carnack?” asked Horgan finally.

“Aye,” Carnack answered.

Janner heard the thunk of Carnack’s sword as it returned to its scabbard, and then he looked up to see the tribesman stomping back to his tents, head bowed with what might have been humility.

Kalmar raised his eyebrows at Janner and Leeli as they made their way back to the platform in an uncomfortable silence. Rudric affirmed them with a quick nod as they took their seats, and for the rest of the afternoon, the ceremony languished on without further incident. By the end of the day, the people of the Green Hollows and the remnant of the Shining Isle had officially locked arms in alliance.

At dusk, when the tribe leaders and their regiments marched around the field to a medley of Hollows tunes such as “Hound and Horse and Chicken Too,” and “Rounder’s Reel,” and the ever-popular “Grouncing as We Nibble as We Go,” even bare-chested Carnack led his tribe proudly by and raised a hand in salute to Kalmar, though Kalmar didn’t notice because he was busy licking sweetberry stains from his vest.

“A fascinating day!” Oskar declared when the parade was over. “Thank you, Rudric, for allowing me to watch.”

“Of course, Oskar. Well done, Wingfeathers. I apologize, your highness, about Carnack’s defiance.”

“Your highness’ means you, Kal,” Janner said, nudging his brother out of his sweetberry hunt.

“Huh? Oh! Don’t worry about it. I can hardly blame him. I hate the way I look too. When can we eat?”

Rudric smiled. "Your work here is done, children. It was good to see you." A look of sadness came into his eyes, and then he turned away to speak to the chieftains.

The ride home was quiet, except for Leeli's snickering at the volume of Kalmar's growling stomach. Oskar grew oddly anxious the nearer they drew to Chimney Hill, and when they crossed the bridge and rounded the ascent to the house, Janner knew something was amiss. No lights burned in the windows. No lantern flickered on the porch. If not for the smoke rising from the chimney, the place would have looked deserted.

"Where is everybody?" Janner asked.

"I don't know!" Oskar said, too quickly. "I mean, I'm sure there's a good reason the house is dark. I mean, I don't know! Ah! Here we are."

Janner turned to his siblings, but they were studiously looking away. When he turned back to Oskar, he saw that the old man had already heaved himself from the sled and slipped inside the dark house.

"Why in Aerwiar is he acting like that?" Janner asked. But Kalmar and Leeli shrugged as if nothing were amiss and climbed down, leaving Janner alone in the sled. "Hello? What's going on?"

Janner muttered to himself as he entered the house after his siblings, annoyed at their mysterious behavior. He smelled dinner, but why were the lanterns shuttered? By the red glow of the fire in the hearth, he saw Podo reclining in his favorite chair, but the rest of the room was dark. Oskar and the others were nowhere to be seen, and if they hadn't been acting so weirdly, Janner would have suspected that there was some true danger at hand. But if not danger, then what?

"Hello?" he said to the dark room. "What's going on?"

Then Janner heard a snicker behind him, and a gruff voice said, "Get him."

Before Janner could utter another word, he was tackled from behind.

The Thirteenth Muffin

As Janner was pulled to the floor and jabbed from every angle, he finally put a name with the voice he heard: Guildmaster Clout. But why in the world would Clout be here? And why would he ambush Janner in his own home? And why, above all things, would he and several other voices be laughing while they poked Janner in the ribs and legs and gut?

“Happy birthday, laddie!” roared Podo, and at once the main room of Chimney Hill was flooded with lamplight. The cluster of bodies that had tackled Janner dispersed and left him dazed and blinking on the floor. Janner saw not only Clout but also eight of his fellow Durgan Guildlings, dressed in black and grinning. Kalmar howled with laughter and Leeli beamed. Nia emerged from the kitchen with a platter piled high with honey muffins, then placed it on the table, which was heavy with steaming food.

“It’s my birthday?” Janner asked, which only made everyone laugh harder.

“I had a feeling you’d forgotten,” Nia said. “Things have been too busy lately to keep track of the days, let alone the dates. So yes. It’s your birthday. Your *thirteenth* birthday.”

At last, a smile spread over Janner’s face. He brushed himself off and greeted his fellow guildlings with playful punches. “Larnik! Brosa! How long have you been here?”

“Long enough to want to eat a henfoot,” Brosa said.

“Let’s eat,” said Kelvey O’Sally. “My dogs are aching for the scraps.”

Janner hugged Podo and his mother, remembering Nia’s comment about how tall he’d grown. How had he forgotten his birthday? He had asked her

about it weeks earlier, but with Durgan training, T.H.A.G.S., winter chores, and his anxiety about the coming war, the last thing on his mind was his birthday.

The meal was a combination of his favorites: spice-roasted shadhaunch, butterfire biscuits, hogpig gravy, pumpkin soup, soakbeans, and herder's meatpie. But even better than the food was the joy he felt in the presence of his family and friends: Guildmaster Clout, Larnik and Brosa, Morsha Mac-Figg, Churleston James, Joe Bill, and Quincy Candlesmith, along with the two O'Sally brothers, Kelvey and young Thorn (who sat quietly beside Leeli). Janner had been in class and played countless games with these friends, but they had never before gathered at Chimney Hill for a meal. The fact that they had done so in his honor filled him with gladness. They ate and ate, while Podo regaled Janner's friends with the most embarrassing stories he could think of.

"Like the time ye got yer head stuck in the yard gate!"

"That never happened," Janner said.

"Did it not?" Podo said, taking a greasy bite of shadhaunch.

"It was a wagon wheel," Janner mumbled, feeling amidst the laughter that he had never eaten so much in his life.

"Can we get started with the honeymuffins now?" Podo asked, rubbing his hands together with glee. "It's me favorite part."

Nia smiled and passed the platter of muffins to Janner with a roll of her eyes. "We might as well get it over with."

"Mama, these look good, but I'm stuffed." Janner sighed as he passed the tray to Brosa, who pushed it back toward him with a devious smile. "Aren't you having one?" Janner asked.

"Nope."

"Those are fer you, lad," Podo cackled. "Every last one of 'em."

Janner looked around the table and was met with nothing but grins, even from Nia.

"It's a Durgan Guild thing, son. Sorry."

Janner counted the honeymuffins with mounting dread. There were

thirteen. He had just stuffed himself with dinner, and now he was supposed to eat a platter full of sticky sweet muffins? “Do I have to?”

“Welcome to Ban Rona, guildling,” Clout said, leaning back and tossing his napkin onto his plate. “This is my favorite part too.”

By the time he had finished the fifth muffin, Janner was ready to lose his meal and Podo was ready to lose his composure, snorting gleefully every time Janner wiped the sweat from his forehead. The rest of the party had commenced to pleasant chatter among themselves, but always with an eye on Janner’s progress. He was enjoying his birthday less with every bite. When he swallowed a dangerous burp, he pushed away from the table, thinking that the joke had played itself out. But Nia of all people stopped him. “Where do you think you’re going?”

“But there are eight more. Eight!”

“Then you’d better get busy,” Morsha MacFigg said with a snicker.

“Oy. We all had to do it when we turned,” Quincy Candlesmith said.

Janner paced the room for a few nauseous minutes, then sat back down and forced four more muffins down. Podo watched with gleaming eyes, hardly able to contain himself. “Ah, this is the life, lass. Watchin’ yer grandson grow up before yer very eyes.”

Unable to believe he was doing it, Janner at last lifted the thirteenth hon-ey-muffin to his lips. Hot bile rose in his throat, and he decided he would never eat again. No one at the table spoke, and he had their full attention as he bit into the gooey dessert. He figured it was only because he felt so ill, but the final muffin, the one at the bottom of the pile, seemed to taste different. After he swallowed the first bite, everyone at the table stood and began clearing their dishes.

“Wait, that’s it?” Janner said, barely noticing the way he slurred his words. The room was spinning, and he began to suspect it wasn’t just that he had eaten too much. “What was in that last muffin?” he mumbled.

“That’s your birthday present,” said Clout. He took the muffin from Janner and helped him to his feet. “Nia, do you have his pack?”

Janner tottered but felt Clout’s strong hand on his elbow.

“Good luck, Janner,” said Brosa.

Kalmar whacked him on the shoulder. “See you in a few days, old man.”

“Be careful,” Leeli said with a kiss on his cheek.

“What’s going on?” Janner asked, though it sounded more like, “Whazzzzgoingnnnn?” His knees buckled and Clout eased him to the floor.

Clout sat on his haunches and looked Janner in the eye. “You’re thirteen, lad, and one of the finest Durgans I’ve seen in a long time. You’ll be fine. Help me out, guildlings.” Janner felt himself lifted by several hands. Someone pulled his arms through the sleeves of his winter coat, while someone else placed a heavy pack over his shoulders. He was afraid, but whatever they had put in that last muffin made the fear seem distant. Nia hugged him, Podo clapped him on the back, and the next thing he knew he was outside in the freezing air being lifted onto a horse in front of Guildmaster Clout.

Out of the night rode a figure that Janner dimly recognized as Rudric. He was surely uncomfortable being so close to Chimney Hill, and Janner felt an impulse to try to make him feel welcome, but his lips wouldn’t move. Rudric handed Clout something—a sword?

“Make sure he gets this, Clout. It was mine when I was a lad, and I want him to have it, if that’s all right.”

“Oy, Keeper,” Clout said with a nod. “A fine gift.”

Then Rudric nodded at Janner and rode away. Janner wanted to say thank you or at least wave, but his arms were as useless as his mouth.

“There’s nothing to it,” Clout said as he repositioned Janner and clicked the horse into a trot. The last thing Janner heard as he drifted into unconsciousness was his guildmaster’s voice: “You just have to find your way home. We’ll be waiting.”

When Janner woke, it was early morning. He was lying under a blanket beside the embers of a dying fire in snowy woods, and he had no idea where he was.



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