

BLACK LEOPARD

RED WOLF

"GRIPPING, ACTION-PACKED . . . THE LITERARY EQUIVALENT OF A MARVEL COMICS UNIVERSE."

—MICHIKO KAKUTANI, *THE NEW YORK TIMES*

NEW YORK TIMES
BESTSELLER

MARLON JAMES

AUTHOR OF
THE MAN BOOKER
PRIZE-WINNING
A BRIEF HISTORY OF
SEVEN KILLINGS



MARLON JAMES

BLACK
LEOPARD
RED
WOLF



Contents

THOSE WHO APPEAR IN THIS ACCOUNT

1. A DOG, A CAT, A WOLF, AND A FOX

ONE

TWO

THREE

FOUR

FIVE

2. MALAKIN

SIX

SEVEN

EIGHT

NINE

TEN

3. ONE CHILD MORE THAN SIX

ELEVEN

TWELVE

THIRTEEN

FOURTEEN

FIFTEEN

SIXTEEN

SEVENTEEN

4. WHITE SCIENCE AND BLACK MATH

EIGHTEEN

NINETEEN

TWENTY

TWENTY-ONE

5. HERE IS ONE ORIKI

TWENTY-TWO

6. DEATH WOLF

TWENTY-THREE

TWENTY-FOUR

TWENTY-FIVE

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

About the Author

Marlon James was born in Jamaica in 1970. He is the first Jamaican to win the Man Booker Prize, for his bestselling novel *A Brief History of Seven Killings*. This novel also won the Anisfield-Wolf Book Award and the Minnesota Book Award, and has been translated into twenty-one languages. Marlon James is also the author of two other novels, *John Crow's Devil* and *The Book of Night Women*. *Black Leopard, Red Wolf* is the first instalment in his Dark Star trilogy.

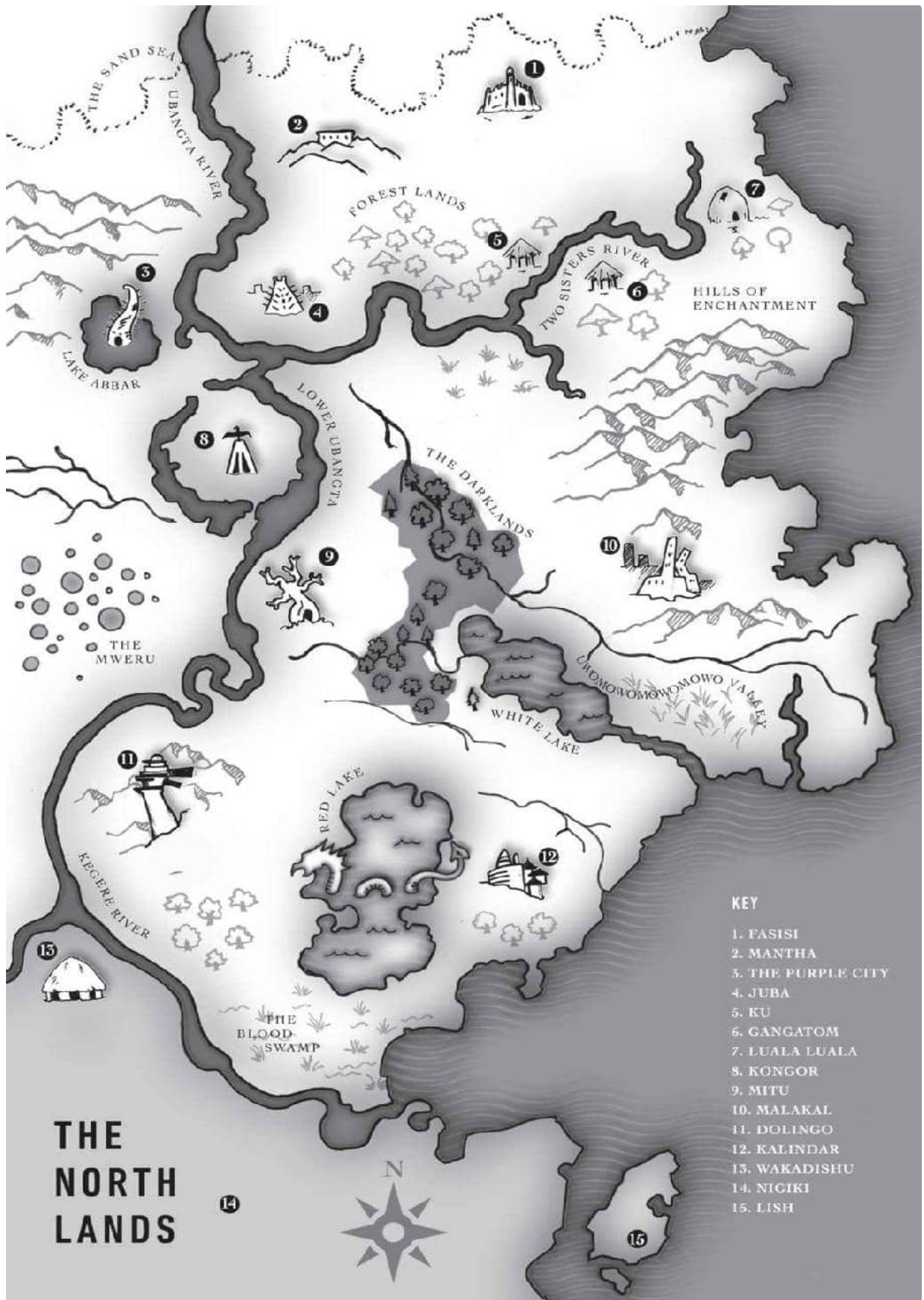
ALSO BY MARLON JAMES

A Brief History of Seven Killings

The Book of Night Women

John Crow's Devil

*To Jeff, for quartermoon and a million other
things*



- KEY**
- 1. FASISI
 - 2. MANTHA
 - 3. THE PURPLE CITY
 - 4. JUBA
 - 5. KU
 - 6. GANGATOM
 - 7. LUALA LUALA
 - 8. KONGOR
 - 9. MITU
 - 10. MALAKAL
 - 11. DOLINGO
 - 12. KALINDAR
 - 13. WAKADISHU
 - 14. NIGIKI
 - 15. LISH

Those Who Appear in this Account

IN JUBA, KU, GANGATOM

KWASH DARA, son of Kwash Netu; King of the North Kingdom, aka the Spider King

TRACKER, hunter known by no other name

HIS FATHER

HIS MOTHER

BELOVED UNCLE, a great chief of the Ku

KU, a river tribe and territory

GANGATOM, a river tribe, territory, and enemy of the Ku

LUALA LUALA, a river tribe and territory north of the Ku

ABOYAMI, a father

AYODELE, his son

WITCHMAN, necromancer of the Ku

ITAKI, a river witch

KAVA/ASANI, boy of the Ku

LEOPARD, shape-shifting hunter known by a few other names

YUMBOES, bush fairies and guardians of children

THE SANGOMA, an antiwitch

THE MINGI, who are:

Giraffe Boy

Smoke Girl

Albino

Ball Boy

The joined twins

ASANBOSAM, monstrous eater of human flesh

THE GANGATOM CHIEF

IN MALAKAL

THE AESI, chancellor of Kwash Dara

BUNSHI/POPELE, river jengu, mermaid, shape-shifter

SOGOLON, the Moon Witch

SADOGO, of the Ogos, tall, mighty men who are not giants

AMADU KASAWURA, a slaver

BIBI, his manservant

NSAKA NE VAMPI, a mercenary

NYKA, a mercenary

FUMELI, the Leopard's bowman

BELEKUN THE BIG, a fat elder

ADAGAGI THE WISE, a wise elder

AMAKI THE SLIPPERY, an elder nobody knows

NOOYA, a woman possessed by the lightning bird

THE BULTUNGI, avengers

ZOGBANU, trolls originally from the Blood Swamp

VENIN, a girl raised to be food for the Zogbanu

CHIPFALAMBULA, a great fish

GHOMMIDS, sometimes-nice forest creatures

EWELE, a vicious ghommid

EGBERE, his cousin, vicious when hungry

ANJONU, spirit of the Darklands who reads hearts

THE MAD MONKEY, a deranged primate

IN KONGOR

BASU FUMANGURU, elder of the North Kingdom, murdered

HIS WIFE, murdered
HIS SONS, murdered
THE SEVEN WINGS, mercenaries
KAFUTA, lord of a house
MISS WADADA, owner of a brothel
EKOIYE, a whore who loves civet musk
THE BUFFALO, a very smart buffalo
KONGORI CHIEFTAIN ARMY, local constables
MOSSI OF AZAR, third prefect of the Kongori chieftain army
MAZAMBEZI, a prefect
RED OGO, another Ogo
BLUE OGO, another Ogo
THE MASTER OF ENTERTAINMENTS, the Ogo fight master
LALA, his slave
THE MAWANA WITCHES, dirt mermaids, aka mud jengu
TOKOLOSHE, a small gremlin who makes himself invisible

IN DOLINGO AND THE MWERU

OLD MAN, lord of a hut and southern griot
THE QUEEN OF DOLINGO, as it says
HER CHANCELLOR
DOLINGON SLAVE BOY
THE WHITE SCIENTISTS, darkest of the necromancers and alchemists
BAD IBEJI, a malformed twin
JAKWU, white guard for King Batuta
IPUNDULU, vampire lightning bird
SASABONSAM, winged brother of Asanbosam
ADZE, vampire and bug swarm
ELOKO, grass troll and cannibal
LISSISOLO OF AKUM, sister of Kwash Dara, nun of the divine sisterhood

SHADOWINGS, night demons who serve the Aesi

IN MITU

IKEDE, a southern griot

KAMANGU, a son

NIGULI, a son

KOSU, a son

LOEMBE, a son

NKANGA, a son

KHAMSEEN, a daughter

IN THE MALANGIKA AND THE SOUTH KINGDOM

A YOUNG WITCH

A MERCHANT

HIS WIFE

HIS SON

KAMIKWAYO, a white scientist turned monster



1

A DOG, A CAT,
A WOLF,
AND A FOX

Bi oju ri enu a pamo.



ONE

The child is dead. There is nothing left to know.

I hear there is a queen in the south who kills the man who brings her bad news. So when I give word of the boy's death, do I write my own death with it? Truth eats lies just as the crocodile eats the moon, and yet my witness is the same today as it will be tomorrow. No, I did not kill him. Though I may have wanted him dead. Craved for it the way a glutton craves goat flesh. Oh, to draw a bow and fire it through his black heart and watch it explode black blood, and to watch his eyes for when they stop blinking, when they look but stop seeing, and to listen for his voice croaking and hear his chest heave in a death rattle saying, Look, my wretched spirit leaves this most wretched of bodies, and to smile at such tidings and dance at such a loss. Yes, I glut at the conceit of it. But no, I did not kill him.

Bi oju ri enu a pamo.

Not everything the eye sees should be spoken by the mouth.

This cell is larger than the one before. I smell the dried blood of executed men; I hear their ghosts still screaming. Your bread carries weevils, and your water carries the piss of ten and two guards and the goat they fuck for sport. Shall I give you a story?

I am just a man who some have called a wolf. The child is dead. I know the old woman brings you different news. Call him murderer, she says. Even though my only sorrow is that I did not kill her. The redheaded one said the child's head was infested with devils. If you believe in devils. I believe in bad blood. You look like a man who has never shed blood. And yet blood sticks between your fingers. A boy you circumcised, a young girl too small for your big ... Look how that thrills you. Look at you.

I will give you a story.

It begins with a Leopard.

And a witch.

Grand Inquisitor.

Fetish priest.

No, you will not call for the guards.

My mouth might say too much before they club it shut.

Regard yourself. A man with two hundred cows who delights in a patch of boy skin and the koo of a girl who should be no man's woman. Because that is what you seek, is it not? A dark little thing that cannot be found in thirty sacks of gold or two hundred cows or two hundred wives. Something that you have lost—no, it was taken from you. That light, you see it and you want it—not light from the sun, or from the thunder god in the night sky, but light with no blemish, light in a boy who has no knowledge of women, a girl you bought for marriage, not because you need a wife, for you have two hundred cows, but a wife you can tear open, because you search for it in holes, black holes, wet holes, undergrown holes for the light that vampires look for, and you will have it, you will dress it up in ceremony, circumcision for the boy, consummation for the girl, and when they shed blood, and spit, and sperm and piss you leave it all on your skin, to go to the iroko tree and use any hole you find.

The child is dead, and so is everyone.

I walked for days, through swarms of flies in the Blood Swamp and skin-slicing rocks in salt plains, through day and night. I walked as far south as Omororo and did not know or care. Men detained me as a beggar, took me for a thief, tortured me as a traitor, and when news of the dead child reached your kingdom, arrested me as a murderer. Did you know there were five men in my cell? Four nights ago. The scarf around my neck belongs to the only man who left on two feet. He might even see from his right eye again one day.

The other four. Make record as I have said it.

Old men say night is a fool. It will not judge, but whatever comes it will not warn. The first came for my bed. I woke up to my own death rattle, and it was a man, crushing my throat. Shorter than an Ogo, but taller than a horse. Smelled like he butchered a goat. Grabbed me by the neck and hoisted me up in the air while the other men kept quiet. I tried to pull his fingers but a devil was in his grip. Kicking his chest was kicking stone. He held me up as if admiring a precious jewel. I kneed him in the jaw so hard his teeth sliced his tongue. He dropped me, and I charged for his balls like a bull. He fell, I grabbed his knife, razor sharp, and cut his throat. The second grabbed for my arms, but I was naked and slippery. The knife—my knife—I rammed it between his ribs and heard his heart pop. The third man danced with his feet and fists, like a night fly, whistling like a mosquito. Made a fist I did, then stuck two fingers out, like rabbit ears. Jabbed his left eye in the quick and pulled the whole thing out. He screamed. Watching him bawl on the floor, searching for his eye, I forgot the other two men. The fat one behind me, he

swung, I ducked, he tripped, he fell, I jumped, I grabbed the rock that was my pillow and bashed his head until his face smelled fleshy.

The last man was a boy. He cried. He was too shaken to beg for his life. I told him to be a man in his next life, for he is less than a worm in this one, and flung the knife right into his neck. His blood hit the floor before his knees. I let the half-blind man live because we need stories in order to live, don't we, priest? Inquisitor. I don't know what to call you.

But these are not your men. Good. Then you have no death song to sing to their widows.

You have come for a story and I am moved to talk, so the gods have smiled on both of us.

There was a merchant in the Purple City, who said he lost his wife. She went missing with five gold rings, ten and two pairs of earrings, twenty and two bracelets, and ten and nine anklets. *It is said you have a nose for finding what would rather stay lost*, he said. I was near twenty in years, and long banished from my father's house. The man thought I was some kind of hound, but I said yes, it has been said that I have a nose. He threw me his wife's undergarment. Her trail was so faint it was almost dead. Maybe she knew that one day men would come hunting, for she had a hut in three villages and no one could tell which one she lived in. In each house was a girl who looked exactly like her and even answered to her name. The girl in the third house invited me in and pointed to a stool for me to sit. She asked if I was thirsty and reached for a jug of masuku beer before I said yes. Let me remind you that my eyes are ordinary but it has been said that I have a nose. So when she brought over the mug of beer I had already smelled the poison she put in it, a wife's poison called cobra spit that loses taste once you mix it with water. She gave me the mug and I took it, grabbed her hand, and bent it behind her back. I put the mug to her lips and forced it between her teeth. Her tears ran down and I took away the mug.

She took me to her mistress, who lived in a hut by the river. My husband beat me so hard that my child fell out, the mistress said. I have five gold rings, ten and two pairs of earrings, twenty and two bracelets, and ten and nine anklets, which I will give you, as well as a night in my bed. I took four anklets, and I took her back to her husband because I wanted his money more than her jewelry. Then I told her to have the woman from the third hut make him masuku beer.

The second story.

My father came home one night smelling of a fisher woman. She was on him, and so was the wood of a Bawo board. And the blood of a man not my father. He played a game against a binga, a Bawo master, and lost. The binga

demanded his winnings, and my father grabbed the Bawo board and smashed it on the master's forehead. He said he was at an inn far away so that he could drink, tickle women, and play Bawo. My father beat the man until he stopped moving and then left the bar. But no stink of sweat was on him, not much dust, no beer on his breath, nothing. He had not been in a bar but in the den of an opium monk.

So Father came into the house and shouted for me to come from the grain shed I was living in, for by now he had banished me from the house.

"Come, my son. Sit and play Bawo with me," he said.

The board was on the floor, many balls missing. Too many for a good game. But my father was looking to win, not to play.

Surely you know Bawo, priest; if not I must explain it to you. Four rows of eight holes on the board, each player gets two rows. Thirty and two seeds for each player, but we had fewer than that, I cannot remember how much. Each player puts six seeds in the nyumba hole, but my father placed eight. I would have said, Father, are you playing the game southern style, eight instead of six? But my father never speaks when he can punch, and he has punched me for less. Every time I placed a seed he would say, Capture and take my seeds. But he was hungry for drink and asked for palm wine. My mother brought him water, and he pulled her by the hair, slapped her twice, and said, Your skin will forget these marks by sunset. My mother would not give him the pleasure of her tears, so she left and came back with wine. I smelled for poison, and would have let it be. But while he was beating my mother for using witchcraft to either slow her aging or hurry his, he missed the game. I sowed my seeds, two to a hole right to the end of the board, and captured his seeds. This did not please my father.

"You took the game to mtaji phase," he said.

"No, we are just beginning," I said.

"How dare you speak to me with disrespect? Call me Father when you talk to me," he said.

I said nothing and blocked him on the board.

He had no seeds left in his inner row and could not move.

"You have cheated," he said. "There are more than thirty and two seeds on your board."

I said, "Either you are blind from wine or you cannot count. You sowed seeds, and I captured them. I sowed seeds all along my row and built a wall that you have no seed to break."

He punched me in the mouth before I could say another word. I fell off the stool and he grabbed the Bawo board to hit me the way he hit the binga. But my father was drunk and slow, and I had been watching the Ngolo masters practice their fight craft by the river. He swung the board and seeds went

scattering in the sky. I flipped backwards three times like I saw them do and crouched down like a waiting cheetah. He looked around for me as if I had vanished.

“Come out, you coward. Coward like your mother,” he said. “This is why it brings me joy to disgrace her. First I will beat you, then I will beat her for raising you, then I will leave a mark so that both of you remember that she raised a boy to be a mistress of men,” he said.

Fury is a cloud that leaves my mind empty and my heart black. I jumped and kicked my legs out in the air, each time higher.

“Now he hops like an animal,” he said.

He charged at me but I was no longer a boy. I charged at him in the small house, dived to the ground with my hands, turned my hands to feet, and flipped up, spun my whole body like a wheel with my legs in the air, spun towards him and locked him with my two feet around his neck and brought him down hard. His head smacked the ground so loud that my mother outside heard the crack. She ran inside and screamed.

“Get away from him, child. You have ruined both of us.”

I looked at her and spat. Then I left.

There are two endings to this story. In the first, my legs locked around his neck and broke it when I brought him down to the ground. He died right there on the floor and my mother gave me five cowries and sorghum wrapped in palm leaf and sent me away. I told her that I would leave with nothing he owned, not even clothes.

In the second ending, I do not break his neck, but he still lands on his head, which cracks and bleeds. He wakes up an imbecile. My mother gives me five cowries and a sorghum wrapped in banana leaf and says, Leave this place, your uncles are all worse than he.

My name was my father’s possession, so I left it by his gate. He dressed in nice robes, silks from lands he had never seen, sandals from men who owed him money, anything to make him forget that he came from a tribe in the river valley. I left my father’s house wanting nothing that reminded me of him. The old ways called out to me before I even left and I wanted to take every piece of garment off. To smell like a man, with funk and stink, not the perfume of city women and eunuchs. People would look at me with the scorn they save for swamp folk. I would step into the city, or the bedchamber, headfirst like a prized beast. The lion needs no robe and neither does the cobra. I would go to Ku, where my father came from, even if I did not know the way.

My name is Tracker. Once I had a name, but have long forgotten it.

The third story.