

THIS CROOKED WAY

Also by James Enge

Blood OF Ambrose

THIS CROOKED WAY

JAMES ENGE



an imprint of **Prometheus Books**
Amherst, NY

Published 2009 by Pyr®, an imprint of Prometheus Books

Portions of this book appeared as short stories in the following publications:

“Fire and Water” (as “Turn Up This Crooked Way”), *Black Gate* 8, Summer 2005; “Payment Deferred,” *Black Gate* 9, Fall 2005; “The Lawless Hours,” *Black Gate* 11, Summer 2007; “Payment in Full,” *Black Gate* 12, Summer 2008; and “Destroyer,” *Black Gate* 14 (Fall 2009). All are copyrighted © by James Enge.

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13 12 11 10 09 5 4 3 2 1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Enge, James, 1960–

This crooked way / by James Enge.

p. cm.

ISBN 978–1–59102–784–3 (pbk. : alk. paper)

I. Title.

PS3605 .N43T47 2009

813'.6—dc22

2009022254

Printed in the United States on acid-free paper

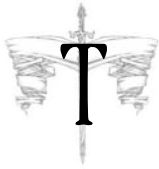
To Nicholas and Jessica



*May your ways take some interesting turns,
not wholly free from monsters and magic*



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS



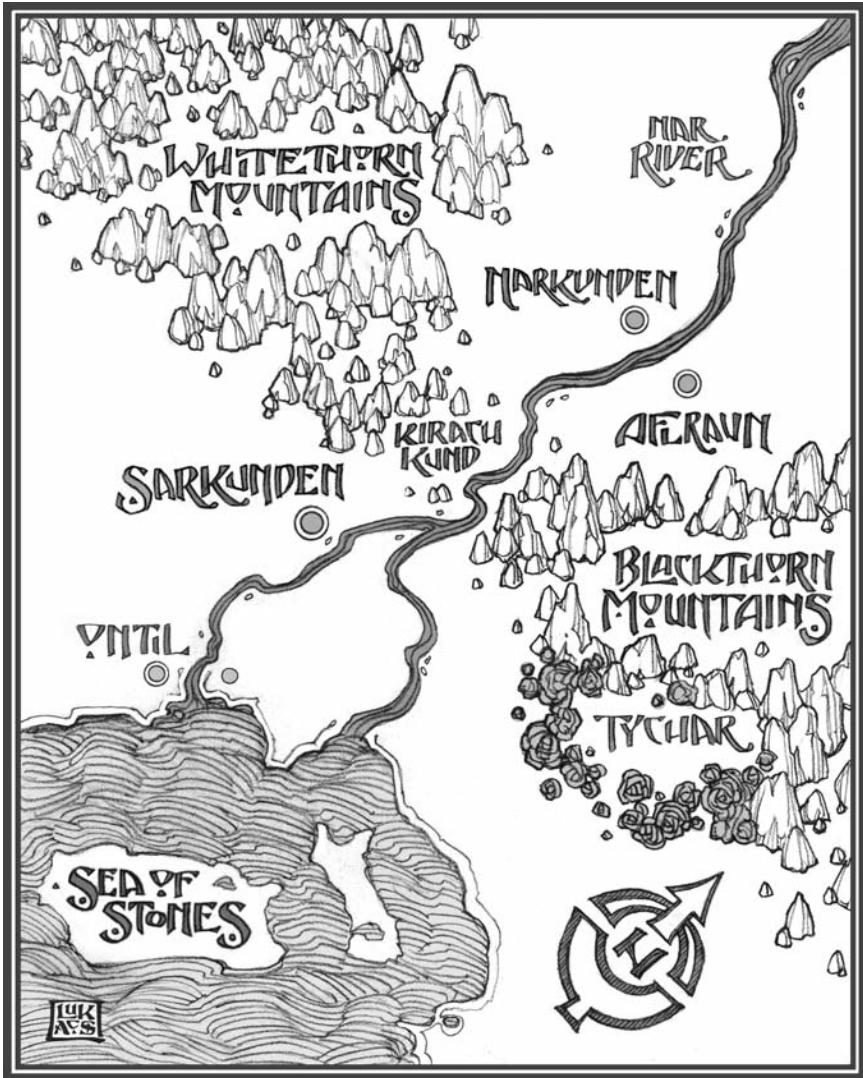
he epigraph for chapter IV is from the version of *Gilgamesh* by N. K. Sanders (Penguin, 1960). The epigraph for chapter XVI is from the translation of Sophocles' *Antigone* by Dudley Fitts and Robert Fitzgerald (Harcourt Brace & Co., 1939).

Some of these chapters appeared, in somewhat different form, in the fantasy magazine *Black Gate*. Thanks are due the editors, John O'Neill and Howard A. Jones—how many, they know and I haven't words to say.



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THIS CROOKED WAY

“NOW, SIRs,” QUOD HE, “IF THAT YOU BE SO LIEF
TO FINDE DEATH, TURN UP THIS CROOKED WAY,
FOR IN THAT GROVE I LEFT HIM, BY MY FEY,
UNDER A TREE, AND THERE HE WILL ABIDE;
NOT FOR YOUR BOAST HE WILL HIM NOTHING HIDE.”

—CHAUCER, “THE PARDONER’S TALE”



I

THE WAR IS OVER

NOR, WHEN THE WAR IS OVER, IS IT PEACE;
NOR WILL THE VANQUISHED BULL HIS CLAIM
RELEASE:

BUT FEEDING IN HIS BREAST HIS ANCIENT FIRES
AND CURSING FATE, FROM HIS PROUD FOE
RETIRES.

—VERGIL, *GEORGICS*



he crooked man rode out of the dead lands on a black horse with gray sarcastic eyes.

Winter was awaiting him, as he expected. In the dead lands it never rained or snowed, and the nearness to the sea kept the lifeless air mild. But it was the month of Brenting, late in winter, and as they crossed into the living lands the air took on a deadly chill and the snowdrifts soon became knee-high on his horse.

Morlock Ambrosius dismounted awkwardly and took the reins in his hand. “Sorry about this, Velox,” he said to the horse.

Velox looked at him and made a rude noise with his lips.

“Eh,” Morlock replied, “the same to you,” and floundered forward through the snowdrifts, leading the beast. He was a pedestrian by temperament and had spent much of his long life walking from one place to another. He knew little about the care of horses, and what little he knew was not especially useful, as Velox was unusual in a number of ways. But, although he had considered it, he found he could not simply abandon Velox or trade him to some farmer for a basket of flatbread.

But Velox wanted food in alarming horse-sized amounts. Morlock had tried feeding him dried seaweed from the coastline, and Velox had eaten it, since there was little else. But Morlock suspected it wasn’t enough for the

grumpy beast, and he was going to have to go to a farm or even a town to buy some horse feed.

This was a problem, as Morlock was a criminal in the eyes of imperial law. He had reason to suppose the Emperor was not interested in seeing him dead, but no local Keeper of the Peace was likely to know this. It was dangerous for him to be seen, to be recognized.

On the other hand, his horse was hungry.

Nearly as grumpy as Velox, Morlock led the beast eastward through the bitter white fields until they reached the black muddy line of the Sar river, running south from the Kirach Kund. Alongside the river ran a hardly less muddy road; at intervals on the road were stations of the Imperial Post; clustering around some of these stations were towns where one could buy amenities like hay and oats.

Morlock mounted his horse and rode north toward Sarkunden. Presently he came, not to a town, but (even better for his purposes) to a barn. The doors of the barn were open and several dispirited farm workers were carrying pails of dung out of the barn and dumping it in a dark steaming heap that contrasted strangely with the recent snow.

Morlock reined in and said, "Good day. Can I buy some oats or something?"

The workers stopped their work and stared at him. Others came out of the barn, and also stopped and stared. After a while, one who seemed to be their leader (or thought he was), said, "Not from us, Crookback."

"Do you own this place?" Morlock asked.

"No, but we'll keep him from selling to *you*."

"Unlikely," Morlock replied, and dismounted. The men were gripping their dungforks and shovels and whatnot more like weapons now. If there was going to be a fight he wanted to be on his own feet, for a number of reasons.

"Know who I am, Crookback?" the leader of the workmen asked.

"No."

"This help?" He brushed some muck off his darkish outer garment. Morlock saw it was embroidered with a red lion.

"Not much," Morlock said.

"My name is Vost. I was Lord Urdhven's right-hand man. His closest

friend. You killed him. Destroyed him. And now you come here. And ask me for oats.”

“The man was dead before I met him,” Morlock said. “We’ve no quarrel.”

“You lie,” Vost said, sort of, through clenched teeth.

“Then,” Morlock replied. He drew the sword strapped to his crooked shoulders. The crystalline blade, black entwined with white, glittered in the thin winter sunlight.

“I hate you,” Vost hissed, raising the dungfork in his hands like a stabbing spear. “I hate you. Nothing will stop me from trying to kill you until you’re dead.”

Morlock believed him. He was beginning to remember this Vost a little: a fanatical devotee of the late unlamented Lord Protector Urdhven; he had lived and died by his master’s expressions of favor or disfavor. His life had lost its meaning when he had lost his master, and he had to blame someone for his freedom. Evidently he had settled on Morlock.

Morlock extended his sword arm and lunged, stabbing the man through his ribs. Vost’s face stretched in surprise, then went slack with death. Morlock felt the horror of his dissolution through the medium of his sword, which was also a focus of power, very dangerous to use as a mundane weapon. A dying soul wants to carry others with it, and Morlock had to free himself of Vost’s death shock and the dead soul’s death grip before he was free to shake the corpse off the end of his sword and face Vost’s companions.

They must have made some move toward attacking him, because Velox was in amongst them, rearing and kicking. One man already lay still in the dirty snow, a dark hoofmark on his forehead. As Morlock turned toward them, his sword dripping with Vost’s blood and his face clenched in something not far removed from death agony, they took one look and fled, running up the road past the barn.

“Hey!” shouted a man coming out of the farmhouse with an axe in his hand. He was a prosperous gray-haired man with darkish skin, and he carried the axe like he knew how to use it. “Why are you killing my workmen?”

Morlock was cleaning his blade with some snow; he wiped it on his sleeve and sheathed it.

“The man annoyed me,” he said at last.

“And the other one?”

“Annoyed my horse.”

“You know what annoys me? People who come into my barnyard and leave dead bodies lying all over the place. I find that annoying.”

“I was going to dump them into the river. Unless you have some strong objection.”

The farmer blew out his cheeks and thought it over. “No, I guess not. They were no friends of mine, just some tramps working for the day.”

“Then.” Morlock hauled Vost’s corpse out of the yard, across the road, and threw it face down into the muddy water of the Sar. The corpse sank almost out of sight; the sluggish waters tugged it away from the bank and it floated downstream. The last casualty in Protector Urdhven’s civil war, or so Morlock hoped.

When he returned, he found the farmer had laid down his weapon and was crouching over the workman Velox had struck down. “This one’s still breathing,” the farmer said. “Your horse is hurt, though.”

Morlock saw this was true: blood was dripping off Velox’s neck and running down his left foreleg, staining the dirty snow. Morlock grabbed some snow from a clean patch and held it to the ragged wound on the horse’s neck. It was already healing, but Morlock thought the cold might help counter the pain. If Velox felt pain: that was one of the things Morlock wasn’t sure about.

Presently he turned away and grabbed a bagful of herbs from the pack strapped behind the saddle. He knelt down in the snow next to the fallen man and examined the wound on his head.

“The skull doesn’t seem to be broken,” Morlock said. “The man may wake up, or not. If he doesn’t, he’ll be dead in a few days; toss him in the river. If he does wake, give him tea made with this, once a day for a few days.” He tossed the bag to the farmer. “It will help him heal.”

“What is it?”

“Redleaf.”

“Uh. All right. Wait a moment, I’m supposed to look after this tramp? I’ve got a farm to run.”

Morlock reached into a pocket and tossed him a gold coin. “It’s on me.”

The farmer’s eyes opened wide as he looked at the coin, weighed it in his hand. “All right,” he said.

Morlock pointed at the red lion, faintly visible on the supine man's dirty surcoat. "You should get rid of this, in case an imperial patrol comes by. This man must be one of Lord Urdhven's soldiers, the dead-enders who wouldn't accept the new Emperor's amnesty."

"I didn't know."

"It's better if *they* don't know. Better for you. For him."

"I'll get rid of it. Let's carry this poor virp into the barn; it's a bit warmer there. And I don't want him in the house."

They bedded the fallen workman down in the loft, and then the farmer said, "It occurs to me that you came into my yard for some reason."

"I need some food for my horse, something I can carry with me. Oats or something."

"Not a horsey type, are you? That horse isn't going anywhere for a while. It's wounded pretty bad."

"He'll be fine by now."

The farmer shook his head and said, "You may be a murderous son-of-a-bitch, but you don't strike me as cruel. And I tell you it'd be cruel to expect him to carry you and your baggage for a while. Leave him with me; I'll take care of him. Or sell him to me, if you don't plan to be back this way. I'll give you a fair price."

"Just sell me some oats."

The farmer wanted to haggle over the price, but Morlock just handed him another gold coin and said, "As much as this will buy."

The farmer sputtered. "You *and* the horse couldn't carry that much."

"As much as he can carry, then."

"It shouldn't be carrying anything!"

Morlock went with the farmer down to look at Velox, who was quietly stealing some hay and hiding it inside himself. The wound had closed and a scar was forming.

"There's something weird about this," the farmer said.

"He's an unusual beast," Morlock conceded.

They bagged up some oats and strapped them across Velox's back. Morlock took the pack off, strapped it to his own back, and they threw more bags of oats onto Velox.

“That’s thirsty work,” the farmer remarked. “You want a mug of beer before you go?”

Morlock considered it and, when he realized he was considering it, said, “No.”

“We’ve got a jar or two of wine from foreign parts—” the farmer continued, doubtful of his ground but willing to be sociable.

“If you offer me a drink again,” Morlock said evenly, “I’ll kill you.”

The farmer did not offer him a drink again. He said nothing at all as Morlock led Velox out of the yard and away, northward up the road to Sarkunden.