

WRATH-BEARING  
TREE



JAMES ENGE

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TREE

☞ A TOURNAMENT OF SHADOWS | BOOK TWO ☞



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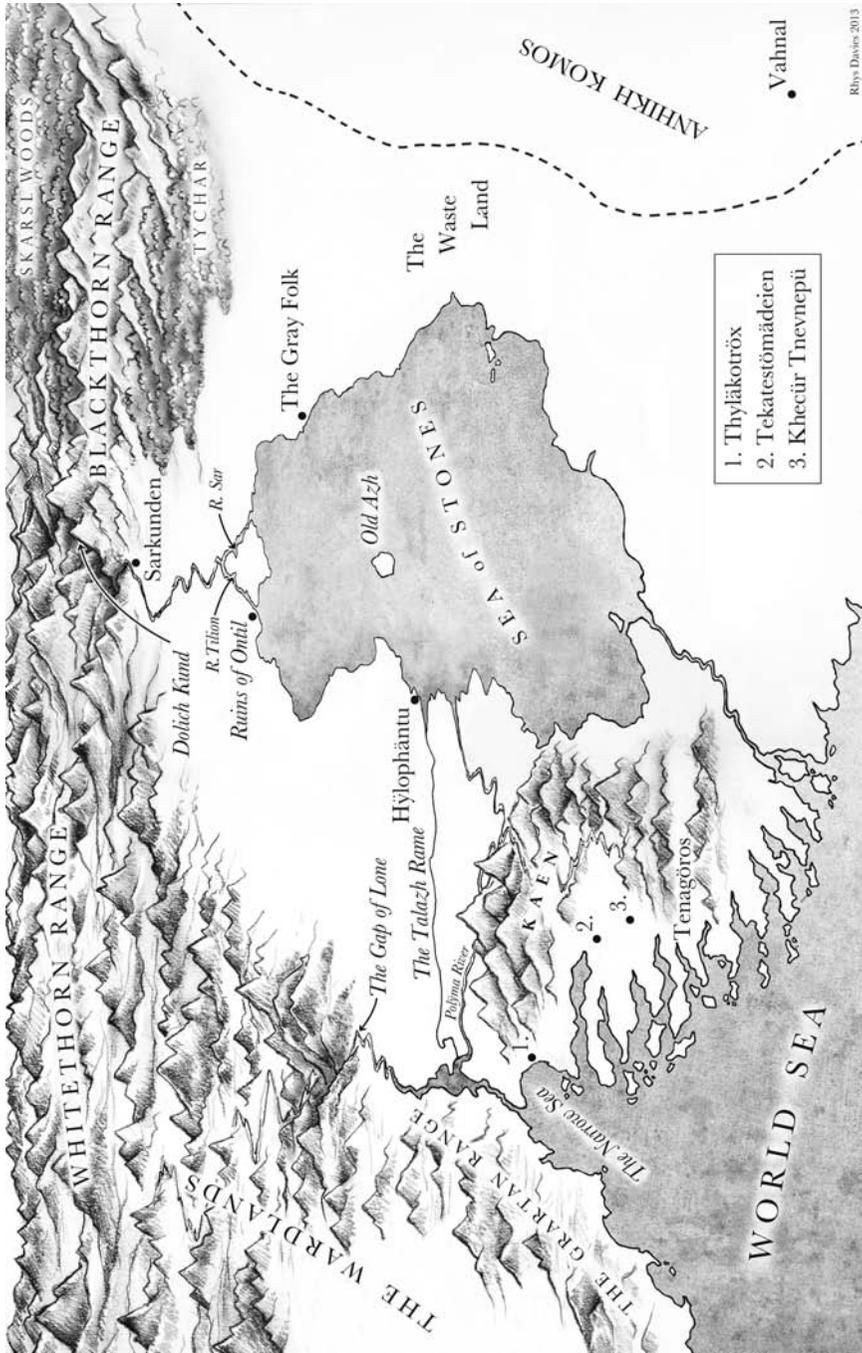
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*For Diana*

“Set me as a seal upon thine heart,  
as a seal upon thine arm:  
for love *is* as strong as death.”





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I'm not sure what the canons say about thanking your editor in public, but thanks are surely due Lou Anders for giving me a chance to tell the story that's been trying to gnaw its way out of my head for a generation or so.

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## WRATH-BEARING TREE

History has many cunning passages, contrived corridors  
And issues, deceives with whispering ambitions,  
Guides us by vanities. Think now  
She gives when our attention is distracted  
And what she gives, gives with such supple confusions  
That the giving famishes the craving. Gives too late  
What's not believed in, or if still believed,  
In memory only, reconsidered passion. Gives too soon  
Into weak hands, what's thought can be dispensed with  
Till the refusal propagates a fear. Think  
Neither fear nor courage saves us. Unnatural vices  
Are fathered by our heroism. Virtues  
Are forced upon us by our impudent crimes.  
These tears are shaken from the wrath-bearing tree.

—T. S. Eliot, "Gerontion"





PART ONE

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

Act first, this Earth, a stage so gloom'd with woe  
You all but sicken at the shifting scenes.  
And yet be patient. Our Playwright may show  
In some fifth Act what this wild Drama means.  
—Tennyson, "The Play"





## CHAPTER ONE

# The Balancer, Balked

**W**ith hands that were not hands the man that was not a man made a machine that was not a machine. All the while he muttered words that were not words with his mouth that was no mouth: “Keep me clean. Keep me clean. Keep me clean.”

But he knew it was too late. He was stained with memories, with hopes, with life. He would never be clean again. He said “me” and meant it. He was infected with the idea of self.

There was a way out of this hell that was not hell. If he could cleanse this world of life and make the way clear for the everstrangers who waited beyond the Soul Bridge, beyond the end of the world, if he could do that he could also be cleansed of life and return to the selfless being he was meant to be, that he should have remained forever.

He made his machine that was not a machine and laughed. He would sweep them all away, everything that lived. He would make them pay for making him care about them, about himself, about everything.





## CHAPTER TWO

# The Necromancer Leaves Home

**M**erlin Ambrosius was in his basement workshop when he heard the god breaking into his attic. The event was far away, and the house well-proofed against sounds, but Merlin had no doubt what he was hearing. There is something about the footfall of a god that, once heard, is not easily forgotten.

“I knew I should have gotten around to insulating that attic!” he berated himself. “Now I’m in for it.”

His watch-beast remarked, “There is a god in the attic, apparently without permission.” A pause and the beast continued, “But have you considered the peace of emptiness that you might receive from union with the Illimitable Cloyn, Arbiter of the Infinite? If I had a soul—”

Merlin reached out with his long clever fingers and snapped both the necks of the watch-beast. The dreamy light in its seven eyes faded. Merlin was disinclined to be evangelized by his own automata, particularly on behalf of a puny god like the Illimitable Cloyn, Arbiter of the Infinite. (It was always the little gods that grasped at those big-sounding names.)

Still, he was in some danger. The puniest god might be deadly to the mightiest mortal, and Merlin did not feel particularly mighty this morning.

Against the lesser gods the best weapon was outright unbelief. Unfortunately, Merlin was old and wise; his cynicism had been battered by centuries of experience. The purer forms of unbelief were increasingly difficult for him.

Fortunately, he had foreseen the risk and armed himself in advance.

He broke open a glass jar near at hand and removed the dried but still living brain of a fervent atheist. He grabbed a pair of boots lying nearby with

his left hand and, holding the dusty brain out in front of him like a dagger , he leapt up the basement stairs two at a time. Old he was. Feeble he was not.

Cloyn was already descending from the upper floor, wrapped in a cloud of metaphysical comforts that slid like fog down the spiral staircase.

“Back, you!” Merlin shouted, and brandished the dried brain wildly.

Cloyn retreated semi-visibly. Merlin and his weapon had the god’s complete attention: nothing fascinates a god like an atheist. Cloyn raised up a shield of apologetics and a long pointed blade of theology . The god was readying for a battle.

Merlin couldn’t risk a prolonged conflict. His atheist had been harvested while still young and uncontaminated by experience, but the brain was very dry and brittle by now. Already he could feel the god pressuring it with golden gifts of emptiness and surrender.

He threw the atheist brain down at the god’s feet and it shattered. He could feel the waves of agony emanating from the dying atheist. The god became wholly absorbed in comforting and healing the atheist’s death.

It was Merlin’s chance. He ran out of the house and sat down on the doorstep to pull on his boots. Although he heard the footfall of the god behind him, he took the precious seconds required to tie his bootlaces. He had tripped once wearing seven-league boots and had no desire to repeat the experience.

Cloyn was almost on him when he leapt to his feet and took a single stride.

The dense thickets of the Lost Wood sank below him, dark green in the morning light. He felt the ecstasy of flight and sternly repressed it: the feeling was akin to religion, and he wanted to leave no trail for the god pursuing him.

He landed lightly on his right foot in a mountain meadow , seven thousand paces from his god-violated house. He swung out with his left foot and took to the air again.

He had not many strides left before the boots became exhausted and reverted to their mundane selves. It took a fearful amount of impulse energy to charge them even for a single stride. But he would take a few more at least. The Illimitable Cloyn might not be the only god who was after him.

Merlin Ambrosius meditated as his boots carried him across the long flat curve of the world. Who, among his many enemies, was powerful enough to command gods as hunting dogs? He could not tell, and it was vital for him to know.

The enemy might strike at his children, too. Yes, that was quite likely. He wondered what he might do about that to turn it to his own advantage. His daughters, if he remembered correctly, were not too far distant, on one of their ridiculous rescue missions to the Vale of Vraid.