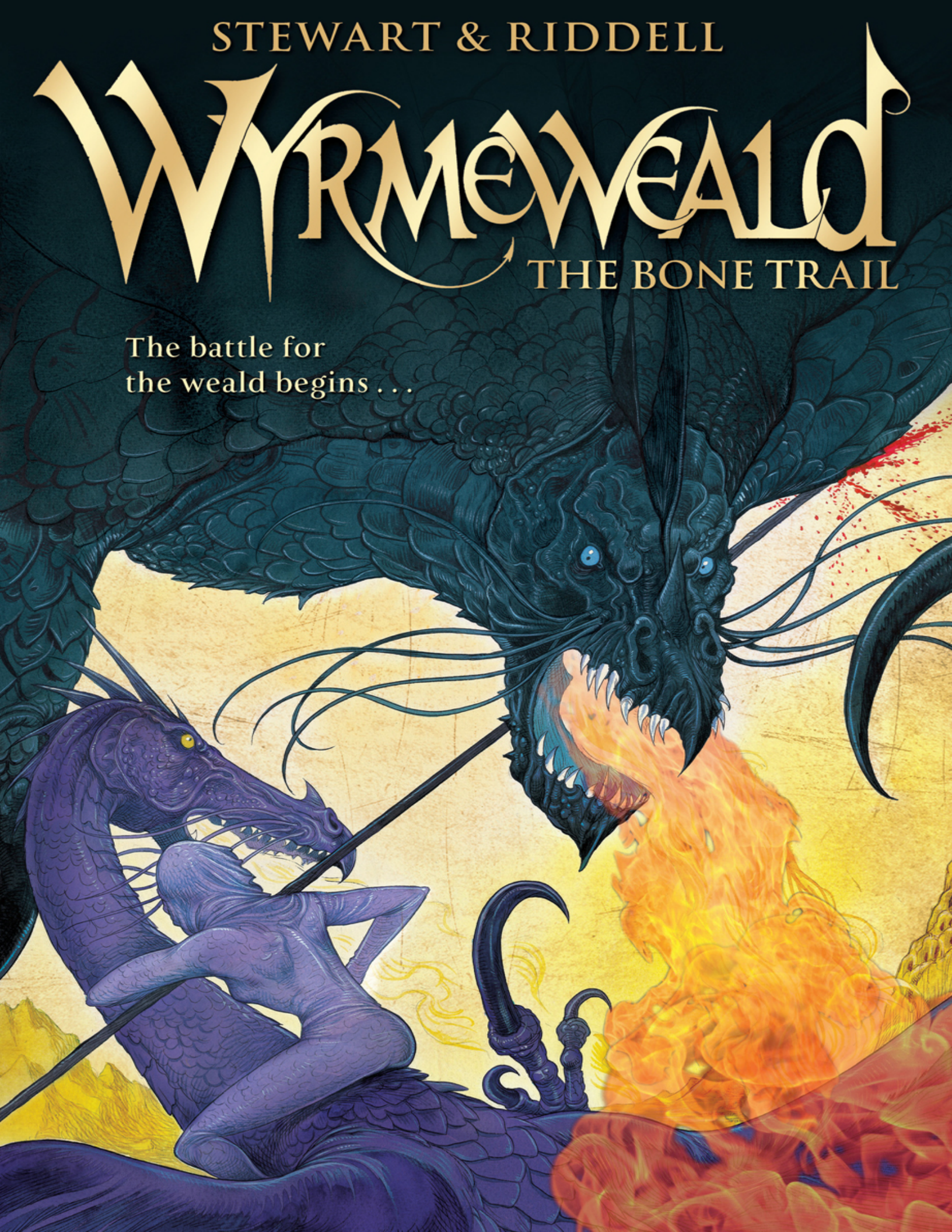


STEWART & RIDDELL

WYRMENWEALD

THE BONE TRAIL

The battle for
the weald begins . . .



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The Edge Chronicles excerpt

Chapter One

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About the Book

An entire herd of greywyrms, slaughtered for their flameoil. Others trapped, then viciously herded through the mountains. And more and more settlers heading up to the high country, the bones of those who don't make it littering the way, stark and white, picked clean by carrionwyrms – the bone trail . . .

Trouble is brewing on the weald. A great whitewyrme and his kin send out a call to arms, and the wyrms begin to gather in their ancient galleries. To defend their land against the relentless march of the kith, with their wagons and settlements and taste for killing.

Payback is coming. Wyrme against kith. Kith against kin. Even wyrme against wyrme. And seasoned traveller Micah, with his friends Eli and Cara, is heading right into the thick of it . . .

WYRMENWEALD

THE BONE TRAIL

RHCP DIGITAL

P.S. - For Anna and Joseph
C.R. - For Rick



Kith – those who hunt and trap wyrmes

Kin – those who bond with wyrmes

Keld – those who dwell underground



The Six Seasons of the Weald

The Dry Season

The Rain Season

Halfwinter

Fullwinter

Halfsummer

Fullsummer

ONE

ELI HALFWINTER SURVEYED the mountains that rose up out of the mist ahead. Fullwinter's grip had relaxed. The snow and ice had mostly gone. The green shoots of half-summer were sprouting.

Eli's eyes narrowed.

The summit was a good day's climb by his reckoning, and the way looked perilous steep. The high sun cast long shadows down the ochre-brown rockface that were like stains. Eli glanced north along the range, then south. The mountains seemed to stretch off into the distance for ever, and he was loath to set out on such a detour.

Looking up, the cragclimber saw dozens of wyrmes flitting round the cragtops and upper ledges. Striped orange manderwyrmes. Spikebacks. Metallic bluewings. He heard their squeaks and chitterings echo off the wall of rock as they pitched and dived in search of insects.

He looked down again, scouring the lower reaches of the mountains. His gaze fell upon a jagged black crevice away to the south. It was a cleft through the rock, large enough for wyrmes to pass through. The scree at the entrance looked trampled, and it was spattered with wyrmedung.

This was what he'd been looking for. A wyrm trail. One of the migration routes that linked winter hideout to halfsummer pastures.

As Eli approached, he found that the crack in the rock was narrower than he'd thought – just wide enough for the great lumbering greywyrmes to pass through in single file. He stepped into it.

The sun was snuffed out like a candle flame and the air felt chill. High above his head was a thin slit of blue sky. The rock was sheer and dark at his sides, and at the most constricted points of the trail had been chafed and grazed by the flanks of the migrating herds. The shadowed track doglegged sharply to the left, then right again, then opened up.

Eli found himself on a small stretch of flat sand. It was enclosed by vertical rockfaces that rose up around him, curved and ridged like giant hands. Behind him was the narrow opening he'd entered. In front of him, blocking the way ahead, was a great pitted boulder.

Except it wasn't a boulder. It was a greywyrme. Massive. Recumbent. And dead.

The corpse was lying on its side, the back bowed and turned away, the long neck and thick tail curved round towards him, and between them the four limbs, outstretched, clawstiff. The head of the creature was draped over a slab of rock, its great maw gaping open to reveal rows of yellowpearl teeth. Deep empty black eyesockets stared back blindly at him.

It was a bull male, seventy summers old by the looks of it, perhaps even older than that. Eli rested a hand on the hard cracked skin of the greywyrme's flanks. It hung loose over the framework of jutting bones beneath.

The creature must have died just before the start of fullwinter, and its body been covered with thick snow that had protected it from carrionwyrmes and other scavengers, and frozen it solid. With the thaw, the wind whistling through the ravine had dried the body out, mummifying the remains and rendering its skin and flesh too brittle and desiccated to be of use.

But the teeth and claws, now they were a different matter

...

Eli straightened up. He pulled his rucksack from his back and set it on the ground. He loosened the ties. He pulled

out a small hammer, a pair of pliers, then unsheathed the knife at his belt.

The claws of the greywyrme's hindfeet were brown and nubbed, but beneath the pitted surface Eli knew they would be fine-grained and make for excellent carving. They would bring high rewards at a scrimshaw den. He set to work.

The knack was to slide the point of the knife in at the back of the toe, where the curve of the claw left a small gap between the knuckle and the scaly skin, and twist. Eli jerked the handle round and the blade sliced through the tendons like they were yarns of wool. Then, keeping the knife in place, he gripped the claw with the pliers and wrenched it back hard, twisting as he did so.

There was a dull cracking sound and the claw came away from the foot. He turned it over in his hand appraisingly, then set it down on the sand.

Eli removed all twelve of the claws from the hindfeet. Then he moved on to those at the front.

These were longer, sharper. Paler. They would make a fine set of pickspikes. Eli took a swig of water from the watergourd at his side, mopped his brow, then set to work again.

He started humming. It was a plodding tuneless rendition of something he'd once heard. He wasn't even aware of doing it.

When the last of the front claws had been extracted, Eli pushed back his hat and turned his attention to the teeth. He peered into the dark yawning hole of the creature's maw, then reached inside. He ran his fingertips over the spike of an eyetooth, the chisel-edge of an incisor.

Using his knife, Eli drove the blade down between the teeth, one after the other, and sawed into the gums. He worked swiftly and efficiently. When the final cut had been made, Eli straightened up. The teeth were loose now. Setting the knife aside, he seized a front tooth with the pliers, then *tap-tap-tapped* at the gum with the hammer.

Slowly. Gently. Taking care not to crack the enamel. Until, with something almost like a sigh, the gum finally gave up its grip on the roots and the tooth came free.

Eli turned it over in his hand, then laid it down next to the claws. It was a fine specimen, and he would have liked to point out its qualities to the boy – the fact that its size alone would furnish a dozen knife handles, and that its grain, even finer than the greywyrme’s claws, would make for flawless carving.

But Micah was not there. He was off on the high bluffs to the west with the girl, Cara.

They needed time on their own, the youngsters. Eli accepted that. Especially Micah, after everything he’d been through that fullwinter past – not to mention the couple of seasons before that with the kingirl, Thrace. It had been a tough year, and that was a fact. But they had survived. Him and the boy. And now Micah had Cara to look out for . . .

Eli smiled. Young love. There was no accounting for it.

Eli Halfwinter on the other hand was a loner. He’d learned the hard way that most kith could not be trusted. They would cheat and rob you as soon as look at you. They would kill you over a small nothing. No, so far as Eli was concerned, he was better off steering clear of other folks.

He glanced back down at the tooth. Though he sure did miss Micah to talk to.

Returning to the gaping jaw of the greywyrme, Eli removed the rest of the teeth in rapid succession. He stood back, wiping the sweat from his forehead, and surveyed the haul. Then, swallowing drily, he unhitched the gourd from his belt and took a long slug of water.

It was hard work. Despite the chill, he was sweating.

He took another swig from the gourd and was fixing it back to his belt when he saw it.

The broken shaft of a harpoon. It was sticking out from the base of the greywyrme’s neck.

Eli had assumed that, given its age, the wyrme had died of natural causes. Certainly he hadn't been looking for evidence of injury. Yet there it was. A harpoon. A *kith* harpoon; the backslant barbs at its base bore testimony to that.

The harpoon was of a type fired from a kind of upright crossbow, favoured by those kith who went hunting for big game. The tip of the blade had penetrated the soft underskin of the greywyrme between the adamantine creases, and punctured its lungs. The ancient creature must have died instantly and, despite himself, Eli was impressed with the cleanness of the kill.

But why bring down so magnificent a creature, then fail to butcher it for meat and strip it of the valuable bone and ivory to barter with in a scrimshaw den? he wondered. It surely made no sense.

Eli shrugged, and was about to stow the claws and teeth in his pack when he noticed the small wound at the base of the creature's throat.

The flameoil sac had been removed.

Eli frowned. His mouth grew taut with rising anger. The kith hunters hadn't been interested in food or ivory, just the tiny gland in the greywyrme's throat.

Returner's wealth.

Small, easy to carry and highly prized. Apothecarists down on the plains would pay handsomely for greywyrme flameoil and its supposedly miracle properties. Anyone returning from the high country with a full pack of the stuff would have their fortune made – never mind that they were responsible for the slaughter of countless wyrmes.

Eli hawked and spat. The thought of it turned his stomach.

He wrapped the teeth up in an old blanket along with the claws, and stuffed the whole lot inside his rucksack before hoisting it onto his back. The pack was heavy, but at least

he had honoured the magnificent greywyrme by using what it had to offer.

When it came to moving on, Eli found that the curved back of the greywyrme was pressed against the crevice, stopping up the gap in the rock like a cork. He had no option but to climb over it if he was to continue his journey. Reaching up, Eli gripped the folds of the wyrme's vestigial wings, then clambered onto the creature's back. He was about to climb down the other side – but then stopped.

His jaw dropped. The trail ahead was blocked.

Before him, like a rockfall of huge grey boulders, were hundreds and hundreds of greywyrmes. They were crammed into the narrow ravine, their throats cut and flameoil sacs removed.

Eli swallowed numbly. These kith hunters had been clever, he could see that now. They must have tracked the herd across the pastures on their long migration to their fullwinter hide in these mountains, and as the old bull wyrme had led them through the ravine the hunters had struck. They had shown no mercy. They had slaughtered the entire herd. Male and female, young and old alike, sparing not a single one.

And for what? For an ointment that supposedly reduced the signs of ageing . . .

Eli's face had turned a dark raw red. His lips trembled and his pale-blue eyes glistened. He was going to have to be late meeting up with Micah and Cara at the stickle falls. He would turn back, find another way through the mountains. He could not face clambering over all these bodies; all that needless death.

'Oh, Micah,' he whispered, 'I'm glad you're not here to see this.'



TWO

MICAH PULLED HIS canteen from his belt and took a swig of water. It was warm, but better than nothing. He wiped his mouth on the back of his sleeve. High above him something screeched, and Micah looked up, his hand shielding his eyes from the glare of the high sun, to see a dozen or so carrionwyrms circling far above his head on those tattered black wings of theirs.

He smiled grimly. If they'd been fixing on having him for their next meal they were going to be sore disappointed. But then, unless he missed his guess, it wasn't him they had their eyes on . . .

Micah pulled off his hat and scratched his scalp, easing the heatprickle. Then, with a single motion, he jammed the hat back on his head and jumped down lightly from the blunted rock he'd been standing on. He kept on up the steep screescritch slope, head lowered. The shadows of the carrionwyrms orbited his hunched body like dark stars, while his own shadow pooled around his feet, black as pitch.

It was good to be back on the trail after the long months of fullwinter spent cooped up underground. The warm halfsummer air tasted good. His limbs felt strong. He climbed the screescritch effortlessly, silently, his fresh-greased boots picking out the best way through the jagged stones like they had a mind of their own. As the ground levelled out, Micah passed clusters of tall mottled rapierspikes that were just coming into flower. And there was new-grown chafegrass and rockvetch and feathermilt underfoot, and a brace of tall mountain oaks over to one

side, their stubby branches hazed with green from half-opened buds.

There came a sound.

Micah's hand shot to the handle of his hackdagger.

The sound came again. Scritch and scratch. Micah peered into the shadows beneath the mountain oaks, and relaxed. A small squat squabwyrm was rubbing its rump lazily up and down the rough bark, sloughing off ribbons of old skin.

Micah turned away and continued over the flat rock and up the next slope. A couple of basking scratworms, the size of his hand, scurried over the jumble of rocks before disappearing into crevices between them. As he approached the top of the slope, Micah slowed down, stooped forward and headed for a tall angular rock that lay precariously close to the edge. He crouched down behind it.

Slowly, breath held, he peered round the side of the rock.

The land fell away on the other side into a flat-bottomed dip. And there, at one end of the depression, was a youth.

He was hunkered down on his heels, his back turned but his face in half-profile. He was thin, fair-haired, with high cheekbones. Downy hair above his top lip suggested he was close to his first shave. He was wearing the clothes of a steerhand or a ploughboy from the plains; a collarless shirt, a homespun jacket, buckskin boots and breeches, all of them frayed and scuffed. His pack lay a little way off, propped up against a flat rock, the burnished copper cookpot strapped to it glinting in the sunlight.

It was this dazzle Micah had spotted from the trail. It had also drawn the keen eyes of the carrionworms that continued to circle overhead.

There was a knife raised in the youth's hand. And as he shifted awkwardly round, Micah saw that he had trapped a wyrm in the longnet that lay at his feet. The long-limbed brown wyrm was thrashing about furiously, screeching,

squealing. One of its hindlegs and both forepaws stuck out through the oversized holes of the net, claws slashing at its captor's shaking hand.

It was a splaywyrme by the look of it, Micah thought. Dullwitted creatures. Easy to catch but difficult to kill, on account of the heavy carapace that covered their wide bodies from neck to tail. Down on the ground, his chin resting on his clasped hands, he watched the youth grip the knife with both hands and stab down stiffly through the net.

'Not that way,' Micah murmured.

The knife bounced harmlessly off the splaywyrme's shell. Spitting and snarling, the wyrme lunged back at its attacker, its vicious snout thrusting at the rope mesh so hard that its head burst out through the net. Its neck swivelled round and its fangs slammed together. The youth pulled sharply back and jumped to his feet. He kicked at the squirming net, but half-heartedly.

The wyrme bucked and writhed, and screeched all the louder. The youth looked close to tears.

He was obviously a greenhorn, out on the trail. On his own. He reminded Micah of himself, all that time ago, when he had first entered the weald. Lonely. Frightened.

Micah climbed to his feet.

Below him, the youth continued his strange ungainly dance, hopping about, dodging the snapping jaws of the trapped wyrme as he attempted to land a fatal blow. Micah pulled the hackdagger from his belt.

'Need some help?' he called down.

The youth spun round, fear in his eyes as his gaze fell upon the glinting blade in Micah's hand. Micah smiled and raised his hands defensively.

'S'all right, friend, I don't mean no harm,' he said. 'But I can show you how to deal with that there splaywyrme.' He started down the slope towards the youth. 'Trick is to flip 'em over and aim for the base of the neck . . .'

The blow to his arm seemed to come out of nowhere. It struck him with a dull crack just below the elbow, making him cry out with pain and surprise and sending his hackdagger scuttering over the dusty gravel. A hefty arm wrapped itself round his neck, squeezing tight and pulling him backwards, and he felt the sharp tip of a knife at his shoulder blades.

‘Keep still,’ hissed a voice in his ear. ‘Y’understand?’

Micah struggled, cursing his stupidity. The knife jabbed harder. Micah fell still. He smelled the sour tang of hunger on his attacker’s warm breath.

‘One more move and it’ll be your last.’



THREE

‘DROP THE KNIFE.’

The arm around Micah’s neck tightened, and he heard the quickening of his attacker’s breath.

‘I said, drop the knife.’ The words were quieter and more measured than before, but hard.

Micah squinted into the setting sun. There at the top of the slope, her slim body silhouetted against the pale sky, was Cara. Her legs were braced, and the primed spitbolt in her hands was pointing over Micah’s right shoulder at his assailant.

‘I’ll kill him.’ The voice was close by Micah’s ear.

Cara’s face registered no emotion, though Micah recognized a grim determination in her eyes. When he’d gone ahead to scout the trail, Micah had told her to follow at a distance, and keep him covered. This green-eyed kithgirl of his had done exactly that. She had handled herself well, just like she always did. And Micah was proud of her.

They had met in the settlement of Deephome two short months earlier in the depths of fullwinter. Bone-chilled and half-starved and nursing a broken heart, Micah had been in a bad way. Cara had looked after him. And he had fallen in love with her. She was gentle and loyal and caring – and surprisingly tough when she had to be.

‘You kill him and I’ll kill you,’ she said evenly. ‘And then I’ll kill your kid brother. Got another one of these loaded and braced at my side.’

Cara’s eyes flicked over to the fair-haired kith who stood frozen over the netted splaywyrme, which continued to

snap and struggle at his feet. The youth had already seen the second spitbolt, and so had Micah's assailant, for Micah felt the grip round his neck get tighter still. Cara's finger whitened on the trigger.

'For pity's sake,' the fair-haired youth blurted out. 'Do as she says!' He raised his hands towards Cara imploringly, his brow furrowed and eyes wide. 'He was just looking out for me, is all. We surely meant you no harm—'

'Hush up!' the voice by Micah's ear snarled fiercely, and at his back Micah felt a sharp jabbing pain as the tip of the blade pressed hard against his skin.

Then, abruptly, the pressure round his neck relaxed and he was shoved roughly in the back. He stumbled forward and landed heavily on his knees, grazing his hands. Behind him, he heard the knife landing on the rock, and the sound of it being kicked across the dust. He looked round.

His attacker stood glaring back at him.

He was about the same height as the fair-haired youth, but older and far more powerfully built, with broad shoulders and a thick neck. He had dark hair hacked down close to the scalp, and blueblack stubble on his jaw that put the other's wispy moustache to shame.

'They don't look much like brothers to me,' Micah observed.

'It's their eyes,' Cara said, striding down the slope, the spitbolt gripped in her hands.

Micah climbed to his feet. 'Their eyes?' he said.

'They're the same,' said Cara. 'Same shape. Same shade of green.'

Micah looked. 'Happen you might be right,' he said. He reached down and picked up the dark-haired one's knife, then, spotting his hackdagger, crossed the gravel to retrieve it. 'You two got names?' he asked as Cara unhooked the spitbolt at her belt - *his* spitbolt - and handed it to him.

The weapon was too cumbersome when you were out scouting. But it sure felt reassuringly weighty in his hand now.

The two brothers shuffled towards one another. The fair-haired youth's thin arms dangled at his side, his fingers plucking at the frayed cuffs of his sleeves. His older brother folded his arms. His fists were clenched. They were both bone-thin and dressed in tattered plains' clothes that spoke to Micah of an arduous journey up here to the high country, recently made.

'I'm Ethan, and this here is Cody,' said the fair-haired youth. 'We are indeed brothers. The young lady was right on that score . . .' He glanced over at Cara. 'We're fresh to the weald and we're not looking for no trouble. Least-ways, not this early on in our new careers.' He attempted a smile.

Beside him, his heavy-set brother continued to glare at Micah.

Micah smiled back. 'We ain't either,' he said quietly. 'Name's Micah. And this is Cara.' He frowned, then added, 'When did you two last eat?'

'A week since,' said Ethan. He nodded back at the splaywyrme, now lying still inside the longnet. He shrugged, his arms before him, palms up. 'I was hoping this wyrme might make us a good meal, but the damn thing sure is hard to despatch . . .'

'Like I said, they can be,' Micah said. 'Unless you know the knack to it.'

He smiled to himself, realizing how he must sound to these two greenhorns. The voice of experience. He bent down and flipped the splaywyrme onto its back with the tip of his boot, then, with his hackdagger, swiftly slit the creature's neck. The wyrme convulsed for a couple of moments, then lay still. When Micah spoke again, there was a certain drawl to his words.

'Got to do it quick, y'understand, and with a sharp blade, so the creature doesn't suffer any more than it needs to.

Respect wyrmekind and use what they have to offer to the full and you'll prosper in the weald.' He paused. 'A friend taught me that.'

He dragged the dead wyrm out of the net by its hindlegs and held it up.

'Either of you boys know how to skin a wyrm?' Ethan nodded vigorously. 'I reckon I can handle it,' he said. 'I used to skin jackrabbits and squirrels back on the farm.'

'Well, get down to it,' Micah said, 'while we get a fire going.'

He glanced over his shoulder. The circling carrion-wyrms had come in to land a little way off and stood peering back at them, their yellow eyes glinting with hunger and stubby barbels quivering at the corners of their fang-fringed mouths.

'There's brushwood down there a piece,' he said, pointing back the way he and Cara had come. 'Want to help us gather it, Cody?'

Cody was looking at Cara.

'Cody?' said Micah. 'The brushwood?'

'Uh-huh,' Cody grunted.

An hour later, as the sun set and the carrionwyrms skittered and snarled in the distance, the four of them sat crosslegged around a small fire, feasting on the splay-wyrm meat and tossing the picked bones into the flames. Micah noted the relish in the two brothers' eyes as they chewed and swallowed.

'You sure it's only been a week since you last ate?' he asked. 'I swear them carrionwyrms couldn't have done a better job than you two at stripping the bones.'

Cody shrugged, and Ethan laughed good-naturedly. 'Might as well make the most of it,' he said. 'Don't know when we might eat again.'

The younger brother was open and friendly, quick to laugh and eager to talk. The older was silent and brooding,

and had hardly spoken the whole time they'd been sitting there.

'We'll manage,' he told Ethan gruffly. 'Somehow . . .'

Micah and Cara exchanged looks in the flickering firelight.

'So how long have you been in the weald?' Cara asked.

'It's been nigh on two moons now,' Ethan said, throwing a leg bone that he'd picked clean into the fire. 'There was still snow upon the ground when we got up here. Ain't that right, Cody?'

Cody grunted, but added nothing.

'I swear I ain't never been so cold in my life,' Ethan went on. 'It was springtime down on the plains, and we thought it would be the same up here,' he explained. 'We were soon disabused of *that* notion.'

Micah nodded grimly. He knew all about the bite of fullwinter.

'And what do you plan to do, now you're up here?' Cara persisted.

No one spoke. There was the sound of windsough. Carrionwyrme chatter. The cracking of the fire.

Micah drew his legs up and hugged them tight to his chest. He looked across at the brothers. Their clothes were threadbare, their boots near worn out, and as for their kit – it was nothing more than an old saddlebag and a couple of rolled blankets for a pack, and the net the splaywyrme had been caught in. The two of them had been lucky so far, that much was clear, but the chances of them surviving much longer were slim at best.

Ethan looked at Cody, who shrugged again.

'Travel on, I guess,' said Ethan. 'Further into the weald. Seek our fame and fortune,' he added with a desperate grin. 'Ain't that right, Cody?'

Cody sighed. 'Bit of fortune would be welcome enough,' he conceded. 'I ain't bothered about the fame.'

The two brothers suddenly looked forlorn and grim in the firelight.

Micah unclasped his hands and reached out for a greenwood stick that lay beside the fire. He poked the embers absentmindedly, sending clouds of orange sparks billowing up into the air. He glanced at Cara, who seemed to have read his thoughts with those blue-green eyes of hers. She nodded encouragingly at him, and Micah saw Cody read her look in turn.

Cody's face coloured and he stared down at his battered boots.

'If you had a mind to,' said Micah at length, looking at Ethan, 'happen the four of us could always travel together.'

Ethan's face lit up with relief and expectation, and he was about to speak when a cough from his brother stilled him. Ethan turned to Cody, his eyes filled with hope. Cody kept his gaze fixed to the dusty ground before him, his brow creased like he was thinking things through. Ethan looked at Micah and Cara, then back at his brother.

Finally Cody looked up. He nodded. 'Happen we could,' he said.



FOUR

THE CAVE WAS round and black like a yawning mouth. It was set into the mountainside above a fall of scree and moss-covered rubble, and seemed to be the only shelter from the wind that was cutting through the shallow gulley. Micah looked away. He slipped the backpack from his shoulders and pointed to the base of the screeslope.

'Reckon this is as good a place as any to rest up,' he said, and scanned the darkening sky. 'Besides, the light's going and I don't want to lose our trail.'

Cara nodded. The weald was wild, daunting, especially by night. But she felt safe with Micah.

Keeping to the north-west, he had followed a trail that Eli had taught him. He'd pointed out to her the landmarks that he was tracking. Some, like the speckled stacks and boulder ridge, were obvious enough. Most of them, however, Cara would not have spotted if Micah hadn't shown her.

The dust skillet. Bear mount. Strutting rooster rock. Hangman's crag . . . Now they were heading for the stickle falls - where Eli would be waiting for them.

Cara smiled to herself. It was as if, in urging them to set off on their own for a few days, the cragclimber had been setting them a test. And despite her initial trepidation, Cara felt that they had done well. Though what Eli would make of their new travelling companions, Maker only knew . . .

She let her pack fall to the ground and crouched down next to Micah, who was sitting in the lee of a boulder, half-sheltered from the icy wind. The two brothers, Cody and Ethan, approached heavy-footed through the dusk.

‘There’s a cave up yonder,’ said Ethan, pulling his collar up. ‘I for one would not mind sheltering from this wind. It is painful bitter.’ He shivered expansively.

Micah shook his head. ‘Caves need careful scouting,’ he said. ‘Ain’t no telling what or who might be lurking in them. Most times it’s best to leave ‘em be.’

Cody hefted the pack from his shoulders and slumped down next to Cara and Micah, but Ethan remained standing, glancing up at the black mouth of the cave and shivering.

‘Get what sleep you can,’ said Micah, as Cara scooched up beneath the folds of his bedding blanket. ‘We’ll head off at first light.’

Despite the caustic wind, with its last taint of full-winter, fatigue and the warmth of Cara’s body pressed close to him lulled Micah into dreamless sleep. High overhead, the slice of moon came and went. Gnarled trees bent over stiffly as the cold wind gusted, subsided, then gusted again. Dryleaf scrub whispered. Rocks softly whined . . .

The scream broke through the lulling night hush like something being shattered. Micah sat bolt upright. Cara’s eyes snapped open.

It was almost dawn. Thin silver-threaded strands of cloud were scudding across the dark sky, but there was a glow on the horizon. Cody was already up and on his feet.

‘It’s Ethan,’ he said urgently, and nodded down at the empty space beside him where his brother’s bedroll had been.

There was another scream, followed by a coarse hissing sound.

Cody started up the scree towards the cave. Micah jumped to his feet, grabbed his spitbolt and scrambled after him as fast as the shifting rocks would allow.

‘Cara, bring the torch,’ he called over his shoulder as he reached the cave entrance.

Cody had already disappeared into the darkness. Micah went in after him. The pitted walls at the mouth of the cave suddenly flickered with golden light. Cara was behind him, a flaming dip-torch gripped in her hands. She raised the torch higher and followed Micah inside.

The cave was large, its narrow entrance opening out into a cavern forested with stalactites and flow columns that glistened and shimmered in the torchlight. Micah spotted Cody first. He was frozen in an attitude of terror, his back against a limestone outcrop and eyes unblinking. Micah followed his gaze.

Ethan was curled up in a defensive ball on a bed of moss at the centre of the cave. Clustered round him were dark brown pebbles that Micah recognized as wyves. Wyrme eggs. Above, clinging to the ceiling with outstretched claw-tipped wings, was a mottled stormwyrme, the size of a plains eagle, its muscular neck curled back and its nostrils flared. The flameoil sac at the base of its throat pulsated.

The wyrme was poised to engulf the cowering youth in a jet of flame. Only the proximity of its precious eggs was preventing it from turning Ethan into a human torch.

‘Don’t move,’ Micah said.

‘I ain’t fixing to,’ Ethan whimpered. ‘Found me a soft bed, only to wake and find *that* looming over me . . .’ He stifled a sob.

The stormwyrme swivelled its head and glared at Micah. Its jaws opened and the sac at its throat swelled. There were no eggs protecting Micah, Cody and Cara.

Micah raised the spitbolt and fired.

The stormwyrme recoiled with a hissing screech and tumbled from the cave ceiling, Micah’s bolt embedded in one yellow eye. Its lifeless body fell limp and heavy upon Ethan below.

‘Help,’ he moaned. ‘Get it off me.’

Cody leaped forward and tore the dead wyrme off his brother.

Ethan looked up at him, his eyes wide with fear. 'I thought I was a goner, Cody. I thought—'

The blow from Cody's clenched fist struck Ethan's jaw with a sharp crack. His head went back, his mouth opened and he stared at his brother.

Cody stared back furiously. 'You stupid damn fool . . .' he began, then fell on him, hugging him, his arms wrapped tightly round Ethan's quaking body. He rested his chin on his shoulder and rubbed a hand over his brother's tousled head. 'You gotta stay close, Ethan, or else how can I look out for you . . . ?'

'Come on,' said Micah softly, resting a hand on Cody and Ethan's shoulders. 'Gather up them wyves while I see to the wyrme.' He fixed Ethan with a look. 'And if you won't heed my advice, then at least listen to your brother, greenhorn.'

Micah picked up the mottled stormwyrme by the wing and strode out of the cave. Gathering up the eggs, four in number, Cody followed. He didn't look at his brother.

Ethan climbed slowly to his feet, picking bits of the mossy nest off his bed blanket. He swallowed hard, a sob catching at the back of his throat.

'They're right,' he murmured. 'I'm nothing but a stupid greenhorn, and this here wrymeweald's going to be the death of me . . .'

'Hush now, Ethan,' came a soft voice. It was Cara. She reached across to him, took a hold of his hand. 'Everyone makes mistakes,' she said. 'It's what we learn from them that counts.'



FIVE

THE SUN HAD risen to its zenith when the line of jagged mountaintops came into view. They jutted up from the fine mist that hung in the valley below, and looked like a line of sharp teeth set in milky gums.

Micah glanced at Cara, who had kept pace with him on the steep trail, then looked back at Ethan and Cody. The pair of them were struggling to keep up.

‘That’s the stickle falls up yonder,’ he called to them.

Ethan paused and wiped the sweat from his forehead on his sleeve. His face was bright red, which made his fair hair appear fairer than it was, and there was uncertainty in his eyes.

‘How can you tell, Micah?’ he asked, trying but failing not to pant. He frowned, scratched his scalp. ‘It don’t look too different to any number of other jagged mountaintops we’ve passed.’

‘If he says them there’s the stickle falls,’ said Cody, pausing in turn, ‘then I for one take him at his word.’

The older brother not only carried what passed for their kit – the old saddlebag and rolled blanket – but also both their water gourds, which were slung from his broad shoulders. In contrast to Ethan’s chatter, he had not said a word since daybreak when they’d set out on the trail. Now the day was at its hottest, with the air above the rocks shimmering in the midday sun.

‘You two all right?’ asked Cara

Ethan grinned back at her. Despite the heat and the exertion of the climb, he was still determinedly cheerful.

'Ain't the mountain been Maker-fashioned that Cody and I could not scale,' he said. 'Eh, Cody?'

Cody looked up and surveyed the surrounding rockscape. His eyes narrowed against the dazzle of the sun. They were high up, and the ridges and canyons lay round about them like folds of sacking.

'Happen not,' he drawled. 'Though a bit of down would not come amiss.'

Micah nodded along the line of glittering spikes of rock. 'We crest that ridge up ahead,' he said, 'and it's downhill from thereon in.'

Sure enough, as they rounded the first of the tall pinnacles, the valley beyond opened up below them. It was broad and flat-bottomed, the tree-clad sides rising up vertical. Ethan let out a long low whistle.

There were splashes of colour in among the shades of green, where blooms and blossoms were on gaudy display. And streaks of silver and gold and metallic blue as, far below them, burnished-winged wyrmes wheeled and swooped through the misty air. They called out to one another constantly, yet their screeches and squawks were barely audible above the sound of rushing water.

With Micah leading the way, the four of them continued along the line of jagged columns of rock that fringed the ridge, until the majestic stickle falls came back into view. Cool spray blew into their faces as a frothing torrent of water flowed out of a chasm in the rock between the last two stickles and tumbled down into the valley in a vast tremulous pillar.

Beside the falls was a track. Trodden down by silver-tails and billywyrmes, and widened by rainwash, the rocky trail zigzagged its way down the far side of the mountain range. Below, at the foot of the waterfall, was a lake. The sun was in their eyes as they set off towards it, an easterly breeze plucking at their sweat-drenched clothes.