THE EDGE CHRONICLES

THE LOST BARKSCROLLS

PAUL STEWART & CHRIS RIDDELL

About the Book

Four dramatic stories – set in all the ages of the fascinating, terrifying Edgeworld – a delight for any reader, new or old.

Cloud Wolf – the story of young sky pirate Quint's first extraordingary battle in the sky, high above the perilous Deepwoods. *The Stone Pilot* – the truth behind the mysterious hooded figure who tends the mighty flight-rock at the centre of a magnificent sky ship. *The Slaughterer's Quest* – the take of Keris, daughter of the legendary sky pirate captain, Twig, and her terrifying quest to discover her father's fate. *The Blooding of Rufus Filatine* – a Freeglade Lancer's epic encounter with a monstrous creature which will change the Edge for ever …

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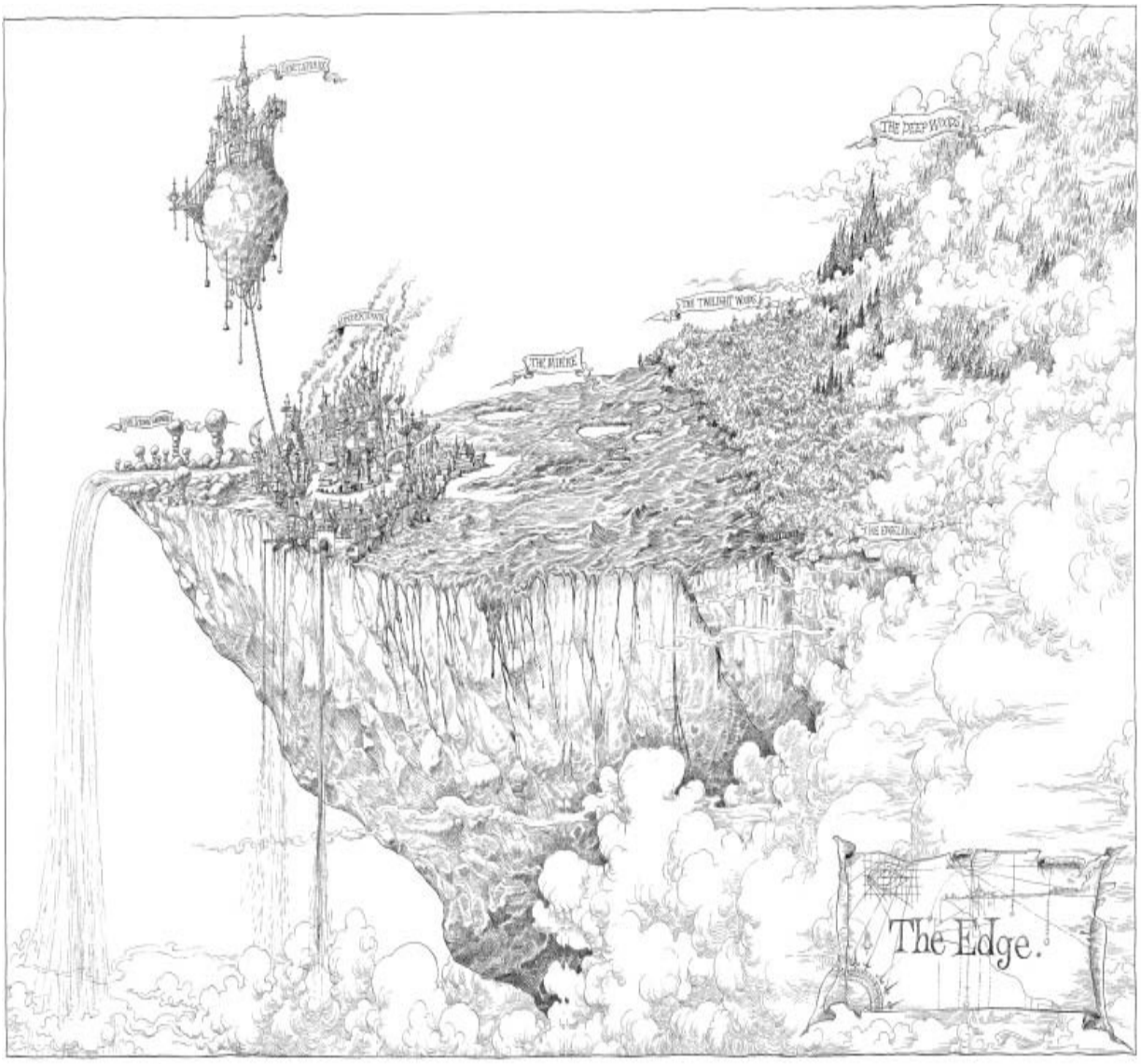
PAUL STEWART & CHRIS RIDDELL

CORGI BOOKS

For Jack, Katy, Anna, Joseph and William


THE DEEP WOODS
THE TWILIGHT WOODS
THE MARKET
The Edge.

INTRODUCTION

THE YOUNG APPRENTICE librarian hurried up the steps of the Great Library, his brown homespun robes flapping. He crossed the threshold beneath the imposing statue of the first High Librarian, Fenbrus Lodd, and entered the vast circular building. He picked his way between the forest of tall pillars, each one studded with climbing-pegs, pausing only to breathe in the familiar smell of woodcamphor and bark-mildew. All round him, motes of glittering dust danced in the shafts of golden light that streamed in through the windows.

Looking up, he saw the barkscrolls hanging in great clusters from the shadowy vaulted rafters. Countless precious manuscripts, meticulously transcribed in woodink onto bark parchment and carefully stored by generations of librarians stretching back to the time of Kobold the Wise, stored in the Great Library of the Free Glades.

Learned treatises on Deepwoods creatures hung beside works on medicine and woodlore. Firsthand accounts of sky battles from the First Age of Flight hung next to cloudwatching manuals and sagas from the Goblin Nations. Works on every aspect of the Edgelands and its history – from the destruction of Old Undertown to the War for the Free Glades – could be found high in the rafters of the

Great Library, their dusty pages full of sky pirates, leaguesmasters, knights academic and strange goblin tribes.

The librarian stopped before one of the great pillars and read the copperwood plaque at its base. Then, tucking the hem of his robe into his belt, he began to climb the great column, taking the jutting rungs two at a time. He was eager to find the treatise on sweetwood timber which he needed to complete the study on buoyant wood he was working on. High up in the rafters, he eased himself down into one of the hanging-baskets and, seizing a rope, pulled himself through the air …

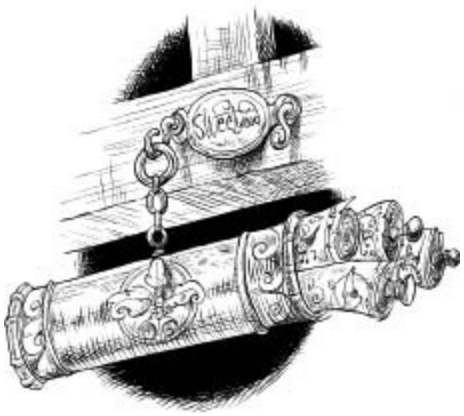
‘Sapwood, shankwood, stinkwood …’ He read off the plaques on the roof-timbers overhead. ‘Sweetwood.’

Taking care not to up-end the precariously swinging basket, he reached across and pulled towards him the dusty scroll-holder that hung from a hook beneath the plaque. Peering inside the carved wooden tube, the librarian frowned. Instead of Arboris Helquix’s recent study of sweetwood he’d been expecting, there were four dusty, long-forgotten barkscrolls inside.

Despite the best efforts of the librarians, sometimes those less skilful in the baskets would knock the scroll-holders and dislodge their contents, sending them tumbling to the floor far below, like falling leaves. Apprentices were supposed to sweep them up and return them to the correct rafters, but mistakes did happen.

Who knows from what shadowy corner of the library these ancient scrolls had come? thought the librarian, as he pulled them out of the holder and held them up.

They certainly looked a good deal more interesting than old Helquix’s interminable account of leaf shapes and woodgrain. The outside margins of the scrolls were covered in intricate illuminations of ancient sky ships, hooded stone pilots, strange goblins with curling tendrils, and great battles.



The librarian sat down and settled himself in the hanging-basket, his heart pounding and his mouth suddenly dry. Slowly, with trembling fingers, he unfurled the first of the yellowing scrolls and began to read …

THE FIRST
BARKSCROLL

CLOUD WOLF

. CHAPTER ONE .

Wilderness Lair

‘PREPARE FOR DESCENT, Ramrock,’ Wind Jackal called to his stone pilot. His hands ran expertly over the bone-handled levers, tweaking the sails and adjusting the hull-weights. ‘We’re going down.’

‘Aye-aye, captain,’ Ramrock shouted back. Clad in the characteristic stone-pilot garb – a thick hooded coat and heavy boots – he worked calmly to raise the temperature of the rock. The torches flared as he pulled the heating lever, the bellows blew the scorched air into the stone cage and, as the rock within began to glow, so the *Galerider* began to descend.

Quint looked over the balustrade of the sky pirate ship and shuddered. Was his father mad? the youth wondered. Going down *there*, into the Edgelands!

Situated between the Deepwoods and the yawning abyss beyond the Edge, the Edgelands was an inhospitable rocky wasteland, swirling with thick, treacherous mists, where spirits and nightmares shrieked and howled, and the gloamglozer – the wickedest creature in all the Edge – was said to dwell.

Quint crossed to the helm. ‘Is this wise, Father?’ he said.

‘Steady on the boom, Master Queep!’ Wind Jackal bellowed back along the sky ship to his quartermaster. ‘Grappling-hooks at the ready!’ He glanced round at his son. ‘Wise?’ he said.

‘I thought we were heading for Sanctaphrax,’ said Quint. ‘You told me the Most High Academe had requested an

audience.’

‘He has,’ said Wind Jackal. ‘But something else has come up. Something far too big to be ignored.’

‘Father?’ said Quint.

‘A carrier-ratbird arrived last night bearing a message from Ice Fox …’ The storm winds buffeted the side of the sky ship with ferocious force. Wind Jackal lowered the neben-hull-weights to compensate. ‘A sky-pirate assembly has been called for this evening,’ he continued, ‘away from prying eyes, here at Wilderness Lair. And I don’t have to tell you how unusual that is, Quint. The old skycur must be on to something big.’

‘But what about the Most High Academe?’ Quint asked.

‘Sky willing we’ll complete our business and be back in Sanctaphrax in time to keep our appointment,’ said Wind Jackal. ‘And if we are not; well, Linius Pallitax and I go back a long way, and what is half a day between old friends?’ He peered down. ‘Lower the mainsail!’ he boomed. ‘Furl the jib!’

Quint shrugged and returned to the balustrade.

As the *Galerider* descended through the clouds, Quint caught flashing glimpses of the rocky landscape below; vast glistening grey slabs with jagged fissures between them. And there, where the sulphurous mist thinned for a moment, was the tall mast of another great sky pirate ship slicing through the gloom.

‘We’re not the first,’ Quint shouted to his father.

‘Nor shall we be the last,’ Wind Jackal replied. ‘A great pirate armada is gathering. It can mean only one thing.’

‘What?’ Quint asked.

‘A sky battle,’ his father replied simply.

*

Wilderness Lair was not so much situated *in* the Edgelands as *beneath* it. Through the gaps in the mist, Quint could see other sky pirate ships coming in from all directions and sailing over the jutting lip of rock. As Wind Jackal followed them, Quint gasped as the *Galerider* was suddenly battered by the full strength of the incoming storms.

Slowly, carefully, his father brought the sky ship round and headed back towards the cliff-face. Beneath the overhang, Quint saw a dozen or more sky pirate ships clinging to the sheer rock. He held his breath as the sky ship dipped sharply in the sky and threatened to roll. The wind howled. The mist swirled. The rockface came closer.

‘Fire the fasting-spikes!’ Wind Jackal bellowed. ‘Launch the grappling-hooks!’

A volley of metal shot through the air and landed with muffled thuds and clangs. Some fell away, but others held firm. The sky pirates tugged at the ropes and secured them tightly. The *Galerider* came to rest alongside the other sky ships. Together, they clung to the vertical cliff-face like a cluster of rock-limpets.

Quint sighed with relief and glanced round. ‘Look!’ he shouted and pointed to his left. ‘It’s the *Fogscythe*! And the *Mistmarcher*.’ He turned the other way. ‘And there’s the *Windspinner*.’

His heart swelled with pride to see how many had come from all corners of the Edge in answer to Ice Fox’s call. Sky pirates might be loners, but when the need arose, they would band together like no-one else.

Each sky ship was distinct from its neighbour, depending on the fighting techniques favoured by the individual captains. The *Fogscythe* was fitted with curved fore-blades which could slice through the sails and rigging of enemy ships; while the elegant *Windspinner* had, fixed to its aftcastle, an intricate catapult that hurled molten pitch onto an opponent’s flight-rock to send the ship into a spiralling descent.

‘And look,’ said Wind Jackal, nodding towards a two-mast vessel with a great brass harpoon at its prow. ‘It’s the

Cloudbreaker. Ice Fox himself must already be here.'

The moment the *Galerider* moored, sky pirates from the adjacent ships lowered gangplanks and rope-bridges both to connect the fleet and to allow access, one with the other – for those daring enough to brave the flimsy walkways in such weather. Soon the *Galerider*, like all the other sky pirate ships in the growing fleet, was bustling with activity.

Old friends greeted one another warmly. Acquaintances were rekindled. Stories were swapped. And as more and more sky pirate ships broke through the cloud cover and attached themselves to the cliff-face, so the party-like atmosphere grew increasingly rowdy. Queep discovered that a long-lost cousin had become the *Mistmarcher*'s head cook, while Steg Jambles – a bluff, bearded character – went off in search of his old flat-head sparring partner, Hogmutt, who had been crewing on board the *Fogscythe* the last time he'd heard from him.

Quint, too, would have liked to explore the other ships. He wanted to meet Grist Greystone, the grizzled quartermaster of the *Fogscythe*, and talk to him about his role in the infamous ironwood blockade. He wanted to examine the catapult mechanism of the *Windspinner*. But Wind Jackal was adamant.

'You're to remain here where I can keep an eye on you,' he said.

'Oh, but Father,' Quint protested, 'I'm not a child any more. I can look after myself.'

'Quint, Quint,' chided Wind Jackal. 'Don't always be in such a hurry to grow up. Whatever you may think, there's still much you have to learn. Believe me.'

Quint nodded. 'Yes, Father,' he said irritably.

With the approaching darkness came the night-chorus of the Edgelands. Deep rumbling groans and low chattering drowned out the constant roar of the wind; shrill, blood-curdling cries set Quint's heart racing. Suddenly, staying on board the *Galerider* didn't seem such a bad idea after all,

and he followed his father around as he lit the oil lamps and tallow lanterns.

All at once, a loud, almost mechanical, voice filled the air. It was Ice Fox. Everyone turned in the direction of the noise to see the sky pirate captain himself standing in the caternest of the *Cloudbreaker*, a megaphone raised to his lips. A second individual was standing beside him, head held high.

‘My friends,’ Ice Fox bellowed above the noise of the battering storm. ‘Eighteen of you I summoned to Wilderness Lair. Eighteen sky pirate ships are here.’ He paused. ‘I have important news.’

The pirates stopped talking and listened closely.

‘Undertown is a free city with free citizens,’ said Ice Fox. ‘It is written in the constitution that no-one is permitted to enslave another. Yet the leaguesmen flout this law. They press-gang any they find to crew their ships – and kill those who refuse!’

There was a rumble of indignant murmuring.

‘Who among us has not heard of the *Great Sky Whale*?’

The muttering grew louder. The *Great Sky Whale*, a vast four-mast league ship, was notorious throughout the Edge for the riches it transported – and the barbaric treatment of its crew.

'This youth,' Ice Fox continued, nodding to the gangly figure beside him, 'who, three days since, managed to escape from the *Great Sky Whale*, can bear witness to the terrible conditions on board. The ceaseless labour. The pitiful rations of food. The incessant beatings …' He looked around. 'An unimaginable existence for a sky pirate.'

'You can say that again!' someone shouted.

'Bloodsucking leaguesmen!' another cursed. 'Something should be done to teach them a lesson!'

'Something *will* be done,' Ice Fox broke in. 'For the news I bring is that the *Great Sky Whale* is currently travelling from the Deepwoods to Undertown, laden with jewels …'

'But the ship travels with the entire Hammerhead Goblin Guard on board,' a voice pointed out. 'And you know what they say about those hammerheads. Cruel, pitiless …'

'Fight to the death as soon as look at you!' added another.

'And what about the armed escort fleet?' asked a third. 'Thirty league ships there were at the last count, all bristling with weapons …'

Ice Fox raised his hands for quiet. 'I have information that for this trip the *Great Sky Whale* is travelling without an escort fleet and with only a single hammerhead guard company on board.' A hush descended. 'Apparently, the Leaguesmaster, Marl Mankroyd, has commissioned the boat …'

A ripple of anger went round. The Leaguesmaster's reputation went before him.

'… unbeknown to the other leaguesmen,' he went on. 'You know how treacherous they can be, even among themselves. He has just completed an illicit jewel deal with the glintergoblins of the Northern Mines and the *Great Sky*

Whale is carrying a small, but priceless, cargo of black diamonds. Mankroyd was hoping to feather his own nest without any other leaguesmen finding out. But with no escort fleet, and but a single company of the hammerhead guard,' he said, spelling it out, 'we shall pluck the treasure out from under his nose!'

A roar of approval went up.

'And we will free the captive crew.'

The roar grew louder.

'We will destroy the evil slave vessel once and for all!'

Ice Fox's words were drowned out completely by the shouting of the sky pirates. Quint turned – a broad grin plastered across his face – to see his father looking oddly sombre.

'Who is this youth that brings such unexpected tidings?' Wind Jackal called across to Ice Fox.

'This is Pen,' Ice Fox replied, and raised his arm high in the air. 'Former bootspit to the Leaguesmaster himself. Now, a freeman once more.'

'Pen … Pen …' Wind Jackal murmured thoughtfully. The name was unfamiliar – yet the face of the gangly youth with the huge hands and feet was not. Where had he seen him before? He shook his head.

'We shall depart for the Deepwoods at daybreak,' Ice Fox continued. 'We shall use ratbirds to track the *Great Sky Whale* in the vastness of the Deepwoods. When they find it, we must strike as one, for even without its escort ships, the *Great Sky Whale* is still the most formidable of all league ships. But we shall overpower it by force of numbers.' He paused and looked around. 'And when we do, the treasure of the *Great Sky Whale* will be ours!'

A tumultuous cheer – the loudest so far – went up.

They could do it. They *would* do it!

. CHAPTER TWO .

RATBIRDS AND TURBULENT-FOG

QUINT BARELY SLEPT a wink that night. He lay in his hammock, tossing and turning with excitement. He would be first on board the *Sky Whale*. He would be brave and resourceful. He would make his father proud.

With such thoughts he drifted off to sleep, only to be woken a moment later by the sounds of the Edgelands themselves – for this was a forsaken place. The vast cliff-face fell away into blackness, with cloud banks breaking against it like raging waves. The mists and clinging fog swirled ceaselessly, conjuring up strange apparitions and ghoulish faces, while the winds howled and whistled through the cracks and crevices of the rock; a ghastly chorus of wailing shrieks and anguished cries.

With a shudder, Quint pulled the covers up over his head, and turned his mind away from the unseen horrors out there, and back to the coming battle. His eyelids grew heavy …

'*Waaaa-iiiee!*' came a blood-curdling screech, and Quint was wide awake once again.

'What *is* that?' he wondered nervously.

And so it went on. All night. By sunrise Quint had already abandoned any attempt to sleep, and was dressed and ready. As the first patches of pink light dusted the sky, he went up on deck.

It was a chilly morning. The mist clung to him like wet clothes.

‘Quint!’ came Wind Jackal’s surprised voice. ‘You’re up early.’

Quint turned to see his father in the misty shadows at the rear of the ship. Steg Jambles was with him. They were standing either side of a large cage, each holding a ratbird in his hands.

‘I couldn’t sleep,’ he said.

‘Too excited, eh, Master Quint?’ said Steg. ‘I know the feeling.’

Quint nodded. He didn’t mention the grinding fear which had gripped him every time one of the spirits or ghouls – or whatever they were – had cried out.

‘Odd-looking little things, ratbirds, aren’t they?’ he said to change the subject. He tickled one under the chin. ‘How will they find their way?’

‘I’ve taught them to seek and home,’ Steg Jambles explained. ‘They use sun-angle and wind-direction, plus they have an acute sense of smell. The scarf of that youth, Pen, has been cut up and distributed amongst all of us,’ he said, removing a fragment of spotted cloth from his top pocket and rubbing it round the ratbird’s snout. ‘Its scent will guide the ratbirds to the great league ship. While this,’ he said, passing a smooth musk-rock pebble back and forth across the cage door, ‘will help them to return.’ He threw the creature into the air. ‘Now fly, ratbird. Fly!’

The ratbird switched its tail, flapped its furry wings and, with a squeaky screech, was gone. Wind Jackal's ratbird flew after it, followed – in quick succession – by the half dozen others which had been waiting in the cage. The same procedure was being repeated on all the other sky pirate ships. And as the curious flying creatures were swallowed up by the dense, swirling mist, the sky pirates fingered the lucky charms around their necks and prayed for a swift and successful return.

'Now the ratbirds have gone, it is time for us also to set forth,' said Wind Jackal. 'Raise the gangplanks!' he bellowed. 'Unhitch the walkways. Prepare the flight-rock, Ramrock.' He took his place at the helm. 'Detach the fasting-spikes!'

The next moment, the *Galerider* and the rest of the sky pirate fleet soared into the sky like a great flock of winged raptors. Quint raised his head and shuddered with pleasure

as the wind blew into his face. Skysailing! There was nothing in the world that came even close to the wonderful sensation of soaring across the sky.

'Quint!' Wind Jackal called out. 'Come and take the helm.'

Quint jumped to it eagerly. And while his father operated the bone-handled levers behind him, adjusting the sails, fine-tuning the hull-weights, Quint turned the great wheel this way, that way, feeling the sky ship responding to his touch like a wild and wilful creature. Far, far ahead – where the rocky Edgelands met the forest – he caught the first glimpse of the tallest treetops, tipped with silver and gold from the rising sun.

'The Deepwoods!' he exclaimed.

'Aye, lad, there they are,' said Wind Jackal. 'And somewhere above their sprawling vastness, the *Great Sky Whale* awaits.'

*

Several hours were to pass before the *Galerider* reached the Deepwoods, by which time the weather had deteriorated.

'Where are those ratbirds?' Wind Jackal muttered, as he scanned the horizon with his telescope.

Quint removed his own telescope and joined in the search. Apart from several of the other sky pirate ships – now widely spread out across the sky – the only airborne creature to be seen was a lone rotsucker, flapping across the sky with a sealed caterbird cocoon dangling from its taloned feet. The Deepwoods looked vast enough to conceal a hundred mighty league ships.

'What do we do?' Quint asked.

'We keep looking,' said Wind Jackal. 'And we remain patient.'

Midday came and went. Late afternoon turned to early evening. Quint scoured the horizon until his eyes hurt.

Would they ever see the ratbirds again?

‘Ratbirds on the starboard bow at two hundred strides,’ shouted Spillins, the ageing oakelf lookout. ‘Two of them … No, three.’

Wind Jackal bellowed for Steg Jambles. It was important that, as ratbird keeper, he be there on deck to see the aerial display put on by the birds when they reached the sky ship. For like woodbees, whose curious wiggle-dance informed the rest of the hive about a source of nectar, so the dips and dives of the ratbirds’ flight would reveal the direction and distance of the object they had been sent out to seek.

‘Ratbirds at fifty strides,’ cried Spillins.

‘Steg!’ roared Wind Jackal for a second time. ‘Where are you?’

‘Here, captain,’ came a breathless voice.

‘The ratbirds are over there,’ said Wind Jackal urgently.

‘I see them,’ said Steg. The ratbirds were getting closer. If they simply returned to their cages, then hunger had been their motive for returning. But if they performed their dance …

The three creatures flew once, twice, three times round the mast and suddenly soared back into the sky. ‘Thank Sky for that,’ Steg muttered. A moment later, and just as suddenly, they tumbled back down, turning somersaults as they dropped. With less than a stride to go before smashing into the deck, they pulled out of the dive and landed on top of the cage. Wind Jackal turned to Steg.

‘How many somersaults did you count?’ he asked.

‘Twelve,’ said Steg. He frowned thoughtfully and Quint watched his lips move as he made calculations. ‘The *Great Sky Whale*,’ he announced at last, ‘is positioned at three degrees west of north-north-west.’ He paused. ‘At about twenty thousand strides off.’

Wind Jackal nodded. ‘Which, with these winds, is a good night’s travel away.’ He turned to his son. ‘You’re looking exhausted, Quint,’ he said. ‘Go and get some sleep.’

‘But, Father …’ Quint protested.

‘You won’t miss any of the excitement,’ his father said. ‘I’ll wake you the moment we catch sight of the *Sky Whale*. Now go.’ He looked round. ‘Steg,’ he said. ‘Take the helm.’

‘Aye-aye, cap’n,’ Steg replied.

Quint stood aside. He was far too tired to put up any resistance. His father was right. The previous night had left him fit for nothing. He really did need to get some sleep.

Down below deck, Quint climbed into his hammock. The cabin was quiet and dark, his covers were warm, and the gentle sway of flight was soothing. With the howls and shrieks of the Edgelands no more than a distant memory, Quint was asleep within seconds.

In the early dawn light, Wind Jackal paced the upper-deck thoughtfully. Steg was standing at the helm.

‘That lanky youth with the big hands and feet,’ Wind Jackal said. ‘The one with Ice Fox – did you recognize him?’

Steg shook his head. ‘Can’t say as I did, captain. Why?’

‘I’m not sure,’ said Wind Jackal. ‘There was something familiar about him.’ He shuddered. ‘Something I didn’t like …’ he said, and added, ‘It’s a good job Quint isn’t around to hear his father prattling on like some superstitious old gabtroll.’

Steg looked at Wind Jackal evenly. ‘Where I come from, we take such things seriously,’ he said. ‘My old grandma – Sky rest her spirit – reckoned that premonitions, intuition and the like, were all part of the “silent language”. *Turn away, and rue the day*, that’s what she used to say.’

‘Turbulent-fog at four thousand strides, and rising,’ Spillins’ strident voice announced from the caternest.

Turbulent-fog rising! Both Wind Jackal and Steg looked round and recoiled in horror.

Normally, turbulent-fog was a low-sky phenomenon, seldom rising up much higher than the tops of the Deepwoods’ trees, and therefore easy to fly over. But not this time. This time, the vast wall of fog which extended from horizon to horizon also towered far, far above the tree-line. Wind Jackal had to think quickly. In less than five minutes, the sky ship would be swallowed up.

Thick and viscous, yet as full of air-pockets as hammelhorn cheese, turbulent-fog was notorious. The sticky air played havoc with flight-rocks, blocking their porous surface, reducing buoyancy and causing them to sink. This would have been manageable if it hadn’t been for the pockets of icy, crystal clear air trapped inside the fog, for each time a sky ship penetrated one of these, its flight-rock would ‘breathe’ again, and soar upwards. Many was the Undertown tug, barge and even unwary league ship that had been shaken to pieces in its violent down-pull and up-draft.

‘Turbulent-fog at a thousand strides!’ shrieked the oakelf.

‘Sky protect us all,’ Wind Jackal murmured as he pressed the amulets round his neck to his lips.

‘Captain!’ Steg Jambles cried out in alarm. ‘What are we going to do?’

Wind Jackal reached out, gripped the bone-handled levers and breathed in deeply. ‘We’ll try to fly above it. Hang on tight, Steg. If we can’t, it’ll have to be a vertical rise!’

Steg gasped.

Wind Jackal lowered the stern-weights. He lifted the prow-weights and raised the sails. With a lurch and a sigh,

the *Galerider* soared upwards. The wall of fog came closer. It was like scaling a mighty waterfall.

‘Get ready to douse the flight-rock on my order, Ramrock!’ he shouted to his stone pilot.

‘Turbulent-fog at five hundred strides!’

‘Come on, my lovely,’ Wind Jackal urged the sky ship as, creaking and cracking, it rose higher and higher. ‘You can do it!’

The bank of fog came closer. If they could just rise that little bit faster, they would avoid being swallowed up …

‘Impact in five seconds!’ the oakelf called.

Wind Jackal’s expert fingers raced over the rows of levers – raising here, lowering there. The sky ship rose more quickly.

‘Four!’

‘We’re not going to make it,’ shouted Steg.

‘Three …’

‘Douse the flight-rock!’ Wind Jackal bellowed.

Ramrock pulled a lever. The flight-rock was instantly smothered with chilled earth. It groaned and creaked as it cooled. Immediately, the sky ship soared skywards, almost vertically and at breakneck speed. Despite their best efforts, however, there was nothing that either the captain or his stone pilot could do to evade the oncoming fog.

‘Impact!’ Spillins bellowed.

The instant it entered the sticky purple-grey fog, the *Galerider* stopped rising. The fog choked the porous flight-rock and the sky ship began a slow, shuddering descent. Neither Ramrock nor Wind Jackal could steady it.

The *Galerider* dropped through the dense stickiness, gathering speed as it went. All of a sudden the fog disappeared and the sky ship hit its first big air-pocket. The air was cold and crystal clear all around them.

‘Rope yourselves down!’ Wind Jackal bellowed to the crew-members up on deck, as he seized a tolley-rope of his

own and tied it round his waist.

The pores in the surface of the rock expelled the claggy fog and sucked in the pure, clean air, causing the flight-rock itself to become abruptly super-buoyant. With a judder and a lurch, the sky ship rocketed up into the air as if fired from a mighty catapult. Terrified, the crew cried out and fell to the deck, clutching hold of anything they could find. Higher and higher the *Galerider* flew, right up to the top of the air-pocket – and back into the fog itself.

Immediately, the sky ship slowed down, and then began to sink once more. Steg Jambles and Ramrock both climbed to their feet. Wind Jackal lowered the sails. Down in his cabin below deck, Quint picked himself off the floor and