

CHAPTER 11

Soaring high in the chill mountain air with Steev flying slightly ahead and to his right, Josh could easily pick out the track below them. It wound round great valleys and clung precariously to towering cliffs as it gradually crept higher towards the snow-line. Here and there the rock around the track was blackened and scorched - perhaps there really were fearsome fire-breathing creatures guarding the king's castle, as the innkeeper had said. He did not know, but the narrowness of the track and the steepness of the slopes was enough to make him grateful that they did not have to walk.

This was higher than they had ever flown, and the view was breathtaking. The snow-covered peaks of the mountains swept down into green valleys. The valleys descended to wide plains. Patchworks of cultivated land mingled with the varied greens of forest and grassland, rich colours gradually fading off to the horizon.

At first the two pilots had talked, pointing out sights to each other - glaciers and waterfalls, towering cliffs and deep gorges, but gradually they fell silent.

They were caught up in the intensity of the experience, seeing things that none of their people had seen before. Red evening sunlight reflected from snow below them and from rivers winding like ribbons of flame towards the far-off western ocean. There, near the river, a cloud of dust showed the movement of a trade caravan, perhaps three days walk from where they flew. All still and silent. There was not a sound but the faint whisper of air over their wings. It was like a dream.

But then something brought Josh back to the real world. He tried to lift one hand from the control bar to flex his fingers, but could not do it. A surge of fear went through him - was this the king's power, reaching up into the sky and paralysing him? He fought to move his hand, strained to unclench his fist from the bar, but nothing happened.

Ice. There was ice all over his glove. There was no magic here, just terrible, searing cold, suddenly penetrating to his bones as if thinking of the cold had given it power over him. He shivered. His fingers and toes were numb, his face a frozen smile. As he pushed the bar over to follow the track as it curved north, he realised that his arms, too, were growing stiff with cold, despite the

thick furs that he wore.

He called to Steev. At first he could get no sound from his frozen face and throat, but eventually, after a few squeaks and grunts, managed to speak.

"Steev! Steev - we'll have to go down. I'm too cold."

His friend seemed to be ignoring him. Was it too late? Had the cold already trapped Steev in a web of ice? What could he do? Then Steev's head turned, slowly and stiffly - but the face that Josh saw wasn't Steev's. It was a mask of blue, with jaws locked in a horrible frozen snarl. There was ice in his eyebrows and around his mouth. A scream caught in Josh's throat, until he realised that his own face must look just as bad.

Steev too had trouble speaking, and while he struggled to form words, Josh began looking more urgently at the mountainside below them. How much further did the track go? How much longer could they fly?

"Let's go on a bit longer", croaked Steev at last. "I don't want to meet

whatever's making those burn marks on the rocks."

"Just to that ridge then", said Josh. "It can't be much further."

On and on they flew growing colder and colder, until ice started to form on the leading edge of their wings, and Josh knew they would have to go down before the gliders fell out of the sky. They gradually descended until the peak of the King's mountain towered above them. It was slightly warmer. The ice cleared from their wings, but still the freezing air cut deep into their bodies, and still the track wound on.

Finally, as they swept around a great shoulder of the mountain, the track below them ended at a small, round ledge. Gratefully, they pulled the control bars towards them and began spiralling down. There was no sign of any entrance to the king's castle, no gate of solid gold guarded by an army of demons, but Josh was sure the entrance was there, hidden somehow. They would find it. There! As they turned to approach the ledge from a good landing direction, Josh saw the darkness of a cave mouth opposite the last few steep steps of the track.

Josh landed clumsily, his frozen legs collapsing under him, scraping along the ledge to the cave mouth. A moment later, Steev landed on top of him. They were bruised, exhausted and cold. They could not feel their toes. They fumbled with the straps of their gliders, but their fingers were too numb to unfasten them. The two pilots stamped awkwardly round the ledge, wide black wings still spread behind them, shivering, beating their arms round their bodies and blowing on their frozen fingers, slowly and painfully forcing warmth into their freezing hands and feet.

At last they could unstrap the gliders. They were still stiff and suffering, but their curiosity was too great to wait any longer. They strapped their swords across their shoulders, wrapped rope around their waists, jammed a few pieces of fruit and dried meat into pouches. Josh found the torch he had brought with him from the island, then they anchored down their packs and folded gliders with loose rocks. They stood and stared into the darkness of the cave. They were ready.

"Are you ready", Steev whispered.

"Yes".

But neither of them moved. Josh remembered all that had happened, all that had led them to this place. They had come so far to get here, been through so much. What was waiting for them in this cave? It seemed to Josh that they had already survived more dangers than anyone could expect. He looked around at the cold, hostile mountains in the fading daylight, wondering if this would be his last sight of the world. He stepped forward into the darkness, Steev beside him.

At first, it seemed no different from the caves they had used for shelter on the long flight from Steev's village. There was no sign of any monsters, but how could this be the entrance to a great castle? It was cold and damp, the floor uneven and the roof low so that they had to stoop forward to walk. Soon it was too dark to see, and Josh turned on his torch. But once a few turns had taken them out of sight of the entrance, the cave opened out ahead of them. The floor and walls were straight and smooth, and as they stepped forward the whole of the cave roof began to glow, brighter and brighter, until the inside of the cave was as light as a bright summer's day.

At the first hint of this light, they had both pressed themselves against the wall and drawn their swords, ready to face attack by monsters or magic.

"Where did the light come from?" Steev sounded scared.

"I don't know". Josh tried to keep his voice calm.

They waited, hearts pounding. Nothing happened.

"It's just a trick," said Steev. "A bit of magic to scare people away. I don't think there are any monsters, and if that's all the magic there is we don't need to worry."

They exchanged nervous smiles and walked slowly on, swords still held before them. The tunnel was about four paces wide, and as high as they could reach with the tips of their swords. It curved off gradually to the right, so that they could never see more than about twenty paces ahead. Soon, they grew more confident. Josh turned off his torch, and they held their swords more casually at their sides.

After walking for a few more minutes, something came into view ahead of them. They paused, then walked on even more slowly, their confidence changed to crushing disappointment. Many long evenings, since they started out on this quest, had been spent in shared daydreams about what they might find here. A great underground storehouse of treasure, perhaps, or a fine palace, forever hidden beneath the mountain snow. But no. They had come so far, been through so many dangers - for nothing. The cave ended in a blank wall.

The two adventurers walked on, not believing their eyes, until the dead end was a hand's breadth from their faces. There was nothing here. Nothing!

Now, as the excitement of the last few hours drained away, the aches and pains of their flight and the fatigue of many sleepless nights caught up with them. Steev slumped against the wall with a sigh, eyes closed. He gradually slid down until he was sitting on the cave floor, his back to the flat wall that marked the end of the cave and the end of their dreams. Josh raised his sword to strike the wall in frustration, but as he did so, he noticed two small black circles, placed one above the other at eye level on the wall. They reminded

Josh of the controls to make light in the Guild hall, back on the island. He reached forward and pressed his thumb on the top circle.

Steev fell backwards with a surprised shout, hitting his head on the floor. The wall he'd been leaning against wasn't there any more. He stared up at Josh for a moment, then moaned and closed his eyes again. A few heartbeats later he realised what had happened. His eyes snapped open and he jumped to his feet. The two pilots stared, alert again, looking for magical traps. What had seemed to be a solid wall had disappeared, leaving an opening into a small room.

"How did that happen, Josh."

"I don't know," said Josh. "I just pressed this mark here."

"Oh!" Steev looked at the small circles. "Why did you do that?"

"I don't know. It looks like the light controls in the Pilots' Guild Hall and I just pressed it without thinking."

"And here it makes a wall disappear," Steev said slowly. "So all this is Science - this wall, the light in the cave - and probably the king's killing wand and floating chair. It's all science - like your island Science - and not Magic at all!"

Josh thought about it. "Yes, I think it is. It's not the same as on the island. It does different things in different ways. It does more than we can do, but maybe we could once do more. There are old stories - just stories for the babies, but they say that we came from the Sky to First Landing and we could fly without wings and move mountains and, er, well, all sorts of things." He was embarrassed. "Just baby stories."

"Well," said Steev. "I've seen a lot of Magic, and I've never seen anything like these things. So it must be Science. But I suppose if you don't understand it, science can be just as dangerous as magic."

"Yes. We'll have to be just as careful."

But it was still a dead end, unless there was another control on the wall of this little room to make another wall disappear. They stepped forward and looked carefully at the far wall of the room. Nothing. What was the purpose of a room like this? Barely three paces by three, and hidden behind a trick wall? Maybe there had once been something hidden here, but if so it had gone without a trace.

"Let's go back to the ledge and get our packs and gliders," said Steev. "We can sleep here tonight then fly back to Dyrron in the morning."

"Yes, you're right. There's nothing here." Josh turned around, facing back the way they had come. "I . . . look!"

There, each side of the opening into the tunnel, were perhaps twenty of the black circles. They were not exactly the same as those on the tunnel wall. Each was marked with a strange symbol, and one on each side, the third from the top, glowed brightly. Josh reached out to press a circle, but Steev pulled back his arm. "We should bring our packs in first. Eat and rest". After a moment, Josh nodded slowly in agreement, but before they could take a step

forward, the wall appeared again in front of them!

They were not worried. Surely the wall would open just as easily from this side as the other? There was nothing magical about it - this time they had been looking directly at the wall, and had seen it sliding very quickly from either side. A faint line was visible where the two sides met. It was obviously just some clever machine.

"Now you can push a circle," said Steev. Josh moved his finger up and down the row of circles, then pressed the top one. There was a faint sensation of movement, but the wall was still there, as solid as ever.

They were trapped in this tiny cell! Josh started frantically searching the other walls and floor for a hidden exit, or another black circle. Steev decided to try and force the two halves of the wall apart with his sword. Just as they were beginning to panic, the wall slid silently apart again.

Both breathed a loud sigh of relief, before they noticed that the scene outside the room had changed! They were looking out into a large curved room with

small, square windows evenly spaced about its walls. The tunnel they had walked down a few moments ago, their packs and gliders - and the way out of this place - were gone.