

29 Laura was standing near the edge of the growing hole. She lost her balance as the hole
30 widened. A friend grabbed for her arm but it was too late. She pitched head-first into the
31 darkness.

32 A horrified gasp arose from the gathered students. They backed away, pressing
33 themselves against the heaving walls, shocked and frightened. All except Alec. He too had
34 watched Laura fall. It felt like being stabbed. He fought his way through the mob of terrified
35 classmates until he came to the edge of the hole where Laura had fallen. Without knowing
36 exactly why, he leapt in after her.

37 Even as he fell, in that instant of strangely frozen time when he was suspended in mid-air,
38 Alec became aware of what a foolish thing he had done. Did he think he was going to save her
39 somehow? How many seconds did he have before he met the unyielding rock at the bottom of
40 the sinkhole and ended everything? Dying a few seconds after Laura did was not how he had
41 imagined his life unfolding. He watched the rock face flash by as he fell.

42 The sinkhole was very deep. It seemed to go on forever. Alec kept falling and falling,
43 faster and faster. The wind tore at his clothes and watered his eyes. He watched the patch of
44 light at the top of the hole shrink to a dime, then a pinhole, then nothing.

45 Yet the hole wasn't dark. He could still see the rock walls flashing by, perhaps more
46 slowly now. The light grew brighter. Alec turned over to discover a green dot far below him.
47 The dot grew steadily larger. It became a disk, a plate, a wall. It grew detailed, arranged itself
48 into a field of long grass hurtling toward him. Before he had time to finish thinking that this was
49 impossible he landed on the grass with a muffled thud.

50 For a time he simply lay there, looking up at the sky. Friendly white clouds drifted across
51 a dome of deep blue. The sun was bright, and warm. Around him, bees drifted sonorously
52 among the flowers, cheered on by golden-yellow butterflies. Was he dead? He hadn't expected
53 death to look like this.

54 He sat up. He was in a meadow, flanked by a forest of tall trees. A classroom desk lay
55 on its side nearby. Behind him rose a great mountain, steep and rocky, the peak tall enough to
56 hook a passing cloud. The mountain was unlike any he had ever seen: a series of broad,
57 limestone terraces, the upper ones receding behind those below, connected by sheer cliffs, as if
58 the land had been rolled up into a cone. Deep forest covered the flat terraces. Here and there

59 trees clung to ridges in the cliffs, growing defiantly upward. The mountain was the largest in a
60 long range that marched across the landscape in both directions.

61 Alec could see waterfalls free-falling over the cliffs. The largest thundered over a
62 precipice behind him. Below the falls, the river rolled down a slope into a long lake ringed by
63 hills as green as Ireland. A village of colourful stone houses stood by a far shore. Other houses
64 peppered the land in the distance.

65 “Hello?” said a female voice. “Is someone there?” Alec followed the voice to find Laura
66 striding toward him across the meadow. “Alec?” she wondered, when she grew closer. “What
67 are you doing here?”

68 Alec didn’t feel like explaining his act of noble stupidity. “I fell into the sinkhole. Sort
69 of.” He climbed to his feet. “Are you all right?”

70 “I’m fine. Which doesn’t make any sense. We should both be dead.” She efficiently
71 reshaped her ponytail with both hands.

72 Alec admired her. She did seem completely unscarred by her fall, aside from disordered
73 hair. “Maybe we are dead?” Alec ventured. “But I don’t remember hitting anything. Wait, that
74 doesn’t make sense. If we hit something I wouldn’t remember it.”

75 She shook her head. “We fell into a hole and . . . came out here. I guess we could be
76 anywhere.”

77 Alec studied the landscape. “Do you suppose we’re in Asia somewhere? Maybe
78 northern India, near the Himalayas?”

79 “I honestly have no idea. What about China? Aren’t there mountains in China?”

80 “I think so. Like in Tibet, right? But . . . how in the world did we get here?”

81 “Hullo!” cried another voice. “Is anyone there? Are you hurt?”

82 Alec and Laura turned to see a couple hurrying toward them, following a path from the
83 lake. They were using long walking staves as they worked their way up the hill. The woman
84 looked to be about forty, the man perhaps older, although to Alec all adults were old. The couple
85 had weathered, lined faces that suggested a lifetime of working outside. Both wore a sort of
86 tunic over calf-length trousers, light and colourful. They wore jewelled sandals and conical hats
87 that reminded Alec of sampans. The man carried a long dagger in a sheath on his belt.

88 “Uhm, hello,” Laura said. “Hi. This is Alec, I’m Laura. We’re fine. But can you tell us
89 where we are?”

90 “You are in the other land,” the man explained. “The place that pairs with yours, as an
91 eagle pairs with its mate. Your land and this land are always separate, yet always connected.
92 Sometimes people slip through, from one land to the other land.”

93 The woman said, “My husband, Durban. I’m Abba. We were fishing on the lake when
94 we saw you fall.” She gestured behind her, toward a long, slender boat, high in bow and stern,
95 with a single mast, bobbing on the waves near shore. Other boats, including something like a
96 paddle-wheeler, plied the lake behind them. “When people fall through from one land to the
97 other land, they always come out here, on the Meadow of Dreams. No one has come through in a
98 long time.”

99 “A very long time,” Durban added. “My grandfather saw it, once.”

100 “Wait a minute, wait a minute,” Alec interrupted. “If we’re in another land so far away
101 and all that, why do we understand each other? Shouldn’t you be speaking in some strange,
102 foreign . . . language.” He stopped, confused.

103 “We’re speaking a strange language too,” said Laura, in a voice full of wonder.

104 “When you are in the other land, you become part of the other land,” Abba explained.

105 Laura said, “What do we do now?”

106 “You are welcome to stay, if you like. Sometimes people do. Or you can go home again.
107 But you must decide at once. The breach that brought you here will soon close.”

108 Alec looked around. The land looked verdant and welcoming. There were farms on the
109 hills around the lake, each one marked by a brightly painted stone barn. His father was stern.
110 “Do people ever stay here?” he asked.

111 “Sometimes,” said Abba. She looked toward Durban.

112 “My grandmother,” he said.

113 “I can’t stay here!” Laura declared. “I have school. I have friends. I have a life. My
114 mother will be worried sick.”

115 Alec shrugged. “I suppose I must go too. How do we get back?” He looked up, as if
116 expecting to see a hole in the sky.

117 Abba said, “You came here by falling down. To go home you must fall up. There is a
118 sacred place, on the side of this mountain, where the breach will remain open, for a time. It is
119 called the Temple of the Sky. You can see it there.”

120 Alec and Laura followed her outstretched finger. Far, far up the mountainside, they could
121 barely see a semi-circular extension of one of the terraces. It hung out over a high cliff like a
122 balcony at an opera house.

123 “How do we get there?” Alec asked.

124 Abba gestured to a road crossing the meadow. “Follow the Pilgrim’s Way. It leads to a
125 high pass through the mountains. A diverging path will take you to the Temple.” She looked
126 steadily at the teens. “You will know what to do when you get there.”

127 Laura looked up at the sky. The sun was hot. “This will be a bit of a walk,” she said.

128 Abba said, “You must be quick. And you must be careful. There are stories that the
129 bandit Trelu is hiding on the mountain; he preys on travellers on foot. You had best be
130 protected.” She turned to her husband. A knowing look passed between them.

131 “It belonged to my grandfather,” Durban demurred.

132 “And you promised your grandmother.”

133 Durban looked reluctant. But he removed the dagger from his belt and handed it to Alec.
134 The thin blade looked very sharp. The hilt was polished wood inlaid with precious stones.

135 Alec was astonished. “I can’t – I can’t accept this. It’s too valuable. Please, I don’t – ”

136 “You are beyond generous,” Laura covered for him. “Thank you.”

137 “I don’t even know how to use this,” Alec confessed. He handled the dagger as if he
138 were afraid he would cut himself. Which he was.

139 Durban said, “You are part of the other land now. If the time comes, you will know what
140 to do with the dagger. Remember, with a fine blade such as this, the hilt may also be the point.”

141 “If you say so,” Alec replied, puzzled. The bejewelled hilt wasn’t pointed at all. He slid
142 the dagger into his belt.

143 Abba said, “Go now. You must reach the Temple of the Sky before sundown. Then the
144 breach will close and the world will repair itself.”

145 “We had better get moving,” Laura said. She was already heading for the road.

146 “Thank you!” Alec said, as he hurried to catch up with Laura. “Thank you for
147 everything.”

148 Alec and Laura crossed the meadow to the road and began their journey. The road was
149 gravel and hard earth, paved with cobbles in the low places, wide and in good repair. “I was
150 afraid it would be yellow brick,” Alec muttered.

151 They soon reached the base of the mountain. A large wooden sign announced Pilgrim's
152 Way. The road began to slope upward. The flowered meadow was replaced by forest of giant
153 trees, some stretching upward toward the sky, others with long, sweeping branches that overhung
154 the road. Their shade provided pleasant relief from the sun. The bushes around them trilled with
155 birdsong. Bright, tiny flowers peeped out of the underbrush like the eyes of shy children.

156 "I'm climbing a mountain," Laura remarked, as they strode up the road. "This is not what
157 I expected from English class."

158 The trail ascended, steadily and steeply. It followed the edge of the terrace, quite near the
159 cliff running along one side. In places, only a narrow band of trees separated the road from the
160 cliff face. On the other side of the road, far away and scarcely visible through the wide-spaced
161 trees, the terrace abutted the base of the next cliff.

162 After a time the road made a switchback to join the next terrace. As they rounded the
163 corner, Alec and Laura could see the trail ahead, angling steadily up the mountainside. "I'm not
164 in shape for this," Alec complained.

165 They pressed on, and up. The Pilgrim's Way zigged and zagged up the mountainside.
166 Roads to unknown places branched off at the switchbacks, always marked by great wooden signs
167 in the strange language of the other land. Graceful stone bridges arced over gurgling brooks.
168 The pair drank cool stream water to slake their thirst as they climbed. Red and yellow fish darted
169 about in the pools.

170 Alec and Laura passed the time in chatter and wonder at the strange life they saw. The
171 forest around them was very old, the trees grand and widely spaced. The great trunks soared
172 toward the sky like the columns of a temple, their branches vaulting the roof. Something
173 resembling a blue-and-white striped cat with a very long tail darted across the road in front of
174 Laura and Alec. Red flowers like miniature trumpets hung from a vine winding around a tree,
175 attended by swarms of shimmering hummingbirds. Party-coloured birds whistled and sang as
176 they flocked above the trees. Once they came upon hundreds of blue and red butterflies, drinking
177 from a puddle. They fluttered aloft and drifted around them like flower petals caught in the
178 breeze.

179 Alec and Laura were not alone on the road. From time to time otherlanders passed by in
180 big-wheeled carriages and rocking carts, apparently powered by some kind of internal engine.

181 The carriages chuffed and clunked as they passed, hissing steam like panting horses. Men doffed
182 their hats to the teenage travellers. Women nodded in greeting.

183 "If we found someone going our way maybe we could hitch a ride," Alec remarked. But
184 they met no one going up the mountain but an old man leading a donkey, itself hauling a two-
185 wheeled cart. The wooden cart was varnished and decorated with concentric rings on the
186 corners, like the tops of Roman columns. It was piled high with mesh bags of fruit. The donkey
187 looked strong.

188 "Good day young strangers," the man said, when Alec and Laura caught up with him. He
189 was dressed in the same style as Abba and Durban, though his hat was blue. "Why would you be
190 climbing the mountain in such a hurry now?" His smile was wide and natural.

191 Alec said, "We fell through a hole from another land. We must get to the Temple of the
192 Sky before sundown."

193 That got his attention. "Oh ye be pilgrims then. And pilgrims must never be stayed from
194 their journey. Hello, Rannu is my name." He doffed his blue hat briefly. "And this is my
195 donkey, Hoté."

196 The donkey, rather to Alec's surprise, bent one knee and dipped its head, as if bowing in
197 greeting.

198 "Alec," said Alec. "And this is Laura."

199 "What is all this you're carrying?" Laura asked. "I've never seen fruits like those."

200 "Why this is only the finest produce of the orchards in the valley," Rannu proclaimed. "It
201 will fetch a fine price on the other side of the mountain." The donkey nodded his great head, as
202 if in agreement with his master. Rannu pointed to three bags in turn. "I have oranges, of course,
203 and reds and yellows too."

204 Laura said, "I've heard of oranges, but not the other two. What are these other fruits, in
205 mixed colours?"

206 "Ah," said Rannu, pointing again. These are oranges bleeding into red, so we call them
207 Bleds. These are oranges becoming yellows, which makes them Orangellows. And these are
208 half yellow, half red, which are Yelredlows."

209 "What are those smaller fruits, red with yellow stripes?" Alec asked.

210 "Those are apples," said Rannu.

211 "Oh, right."

212 Hoté the donkey rolled his eyes. Alec was certain he rolled his eyes.

213 “Can I offer you a ride, my young friends?” said Rannu. “You will be on the Pilgrim’s

214 Way for a time yet. I’m sure Hoté wouldn’t mind a little more weight on the cart.”

215 This time the donkey shook its head from side to side, so emphatically that its harness

216 rattled.

217 “You know,” Alec said, watching Hoté’s agitated objection, “I think it may be just as fast

218 to walk. But thank you for the offer.” Behind Rannu, the donkey let out a great snort of relief.

219 Rannu chose two fruits from his cart, a red one and a yellow, and handed them to the

220 teens. “Something for the road,” he said.

221 Laura said, “Thank you. We were told there would be a path branching off from the

222 Pilgrim’s Way, leading to the Temple of the Sky. Do you know where it is?”

223 Rannu nodded. “It is still far ahead. You will see a sign.” He gave them both a

224 significant look. “But everyone must decide for themselves where to diverge from the common

225 path. You must choose the right road, even if it isn’t the right road.”

226 Alec and Laura looked at each other in perplexity. The donkey Hoté was nodding his

227 head again. “Yes, well thank you for your help,” Alec said. “And for the food. We’ll be off.”

228 “Good-bye Hoté!” Laura cried, as she and Alec hurried up the road. Hoté brayed in

229 farewell.

230 Alec and Laura soon left Rannu and his communicative donkey behind them. About

231 halfway up the fourth terrace, the pair came to a clearing in the forest. The road here ran very

232 close to the cliff edge. Trees had been cleared on the cliff side, affording an unobscured view of

233 the land below. A doorless stone cabin stood on the forest side of the clearing, with great round

234 windows on each wall and a steep roof of red slate. A curved stone bench lined the edge of the

235 cliff.

236 “What’s this now?” Alec wondered.

237 Laura thought about it. “It’s a way station,” she decided. “It’s a place for travellers to

238 rest. Shelter in case it rains.”

239 “Of course,” said Alec. “And that well over there provides water for steam engines.”

240 Laura sat down on the bench. “This is exhausting. Do you have any idea how to eat

241 these?” She held up the yellow that Rannu had given her.

242 “I think you peel it like an orange.” Alec said. He tried that with his red fruit, succeeded,
243 and wolfed down the pulp in a few bites. “Good,” he decided. “It tastes sort of like an orange
244 but . . . you know, I have no idea how to describe how it tastes.”

245 “Nor do I,” said Laura, finishing her yellow. “I was afraid it would taste like a lemon.”

246 “Here, I have a granola bar too.” He fished it out of a shirt pocket, carefully divided it in
247 two, then handed one half to Laura.

248 “Thanks,” she said. “I’m famished.” She took a healthy bite. After a few moments
249 chewing she said: “Do you suppose there are bears in these woods? I’m scared of bears.”

250 He shrugged. “I don’t know. Everything here seems a little different than back home.
251 Maybe the bears are different too.” He shook his head. “So many questions.” He chewed
252 granola.

253 “Here’s a question,” Laura said. “Why haven’t you asked me out?”

254 Alec almost choked on granola. “What? What makes you think – ”

255 “Come on, don’t pretend you’re not interested. You’re always staring at me. In class.
256 Why don’t you just ask? I might say yes.”

257 Alec had no ready answer for that. He decided to improvise. “Well, this is almost a date,
258 isn’t it? We’re having an adventure together.”

259 She laughed. “I suppose so. And we had better keep moving. Look at the sun.” She
260 pointed toward the sky above the towering cliff.

261 “Leaving so soon?” cried another voice. “Please, stay a while. We have matters to
262 discuss.”

263 Startled, the two teens turned to see a man emerge from the cabin. He strode toward
264 them. He was dressed as Durban had been, except that he wore black boots in place of sandals
265 and a rucksack over one shoulder. He had long black hair and dramatic moustaches curling up
266 either cheek. He pointed a wicked-looking sword at Alec and Laura.

267 The teens jumped to their feet. “Trelu,” said Laura.

268 The bandit smiled. “Ah, I see my fame spreads before me like a carpet,” he said. “Now
269 if you would be so good as to empty your pockets.”

270 Alec fumbled for the jewel-handled dagger on his belt. Without pausing to think about it,
271 he jumped in front of Laura and pointed the dagger at the interloper. “Leave us alone,” he told

272 the bandit. “We’re not from this land, we’re travellers passing through. I don’t want to fight
273 you, but, but, but, I will if I have to.” He tried to look menacing. He did not succeed.

274 Trelu scowled. “Are you sure that is what you want, my young friend?” he said warmly.
275 The two men faced each other, blade to blade. Alec’s hand was trembling. Trelu’s sword was
276 twice the length of his dagger, and wielded by a practiced hand.

277 “Oh for heaven’s sake,” said Laura. “Give me that.” She snatched the dagger from
278 Alec’s hand. “Look,” she said to Trelu, “we have nothing of any value so there’s no point in
279 robbing us. So here’s the deal. This dagger, in return for safe passage.” She held it out across
280 her hands.

281 The bandit lowered his sword. “That is a lovely piece,” he conceded. “But what would a
282 man do with two blades?”

283 “Sell it, obviously,” Laura rejoined. “Then use the money to buy a new shirt.”

284 “What?” Trelu exclaimed. “What’s wrong with my shirt?” His shirt bared his chest and
285 secured with a sash around his waist. It was patterned in broad stripes of yellow and black.

286 “Nothing at all. Except that it is unspeakably hideous. You must be an orphan because
287 your mother would never let you go outside in a shirt like that.” She proffered the dagger. “So,
288 take the dagger, buy yourself a new one.” After a moment’s reflection she added: “When you
289 get to the village by the lake, look for a fisher named Durban. He’ll buy the dagger.”

290 Trelu considered for a moment. Then he sheathed his sword. He took the long knife
291 from Laura’s hands. “Safe passage,” he said. “For this blade. And his shirt.”

292 “What!” It was Alec’s turn to be surprised. He was wearing an unbuttoned plaid work
293 shirt over a T-shirt with a Tardis on it.

294 “Give him your shirt, Alec,” Laura said.

295 Both men peeled off their shirts. The thief’s chest was muscular, and bore many scars.

296 “Where are you going in such a hurry, young travellers?” he wondered, as he pulled on
297 Alec’s shirt.

298 “We’re going to the Temple of the Sky,” said Laura. “We’re trying to get back home.”

299 “Ah, so then you are pilgrims,” Trelu said. He inspected the fit of Alec’s flannel shirt.
300 “And pilgrims must not delay when the sun is setting.”

301 “So, we’ll be off then,” Alec said. He was very nervous that Trelu might change his
302 mind.

303 Trelu raised a hand. “One moment, young pilgrims,” he said. “The path to the Temple of
304 the Sky leads to a bridge over a wild river. But be careful. Some bridges pass over rivers. Some
305 rivers pass over bridges.” He grinned, making his moustaches flutter. Then he turned and
306 disappeared into the forest, as quietly as he had come.

307 Alec watched him go. “How did you know he would go for that trade?” he asked Laura.

308 Laura said, “I knew I could appeal to his greed. And to his vanity. Greed because he is a
309 thief. Vanity because he maintains that ridiculous moustache.”

310 Enlightenment shone upon Alec. “Yes, that’s what Durban meant. The jewels in the
311 handle make the dagger good for a trade. And that’s the *point* of it.”

312 Laura said, “Fine then, what do you suppose Trelu meant by that warning about bridges?”

313 Alec said, “I have no idea.” He looked down at his swashbuckler’s shirt, with its gaudy
314 yellow and black stripes. “Do I look as ridiculous as I feel?”

315 “Even more so,” Laura replied, laughing. “But it’s fine. I’m not worried about bears
316 anymore. Your shirt will scare them away.”

317 Daggerless and yellow-shirted, they pressed on up the mountain. “By the way,” Laura
318 said, as they hurried along, “it was brave of you, back there, to try to protect me.”

319 “Was it brave?” Alec wondered. “Or merely foolish. You saw Trelu’s sword.”

320 Laura said, “I remember my grandfather used to say that true courage was one part
321 bravery and nine parts folly. Maybe that’s what he meant.”

322 “Well, if the other land has given me courage, I hope I can take a little home with me.”
323 An iridescent bird resembling a cross between a parrot and a peacock exploded into the air from
324 the trail in front of them. Alec reared back with a surprised yelp.

325 “A little courage indeed!” Laura said, laughing again. The bird floated away into the
326 forest.

327 “Please tell me we’re almost there,” Laura pleaded, some while later. “If I have to climb
328 another switchback I think I’ll die right here.” By this time she and Alec were high on the
329 mountainside. Through the screen of trees she could see the land and the great lake far below
330 them. The sun was low. The trees cast long shadows across the road. The late afternoon forest
331 had grown quiet.

332 “There’s something up ahead,” Alec replied. “At the next switchback. I think – yes, it’s
333 a sign.”

334 They stopped at a clearing, where the road swung around the other direction in its endless
335 climb toward the pass. A panel of great wooden beams supported by stone pillars announced the
336 way to the Temple of the Sky. The sign was very old. Undergrowth was climbing over the
337 pillars. The writing inscribed in the wood was worn and scarred. It was written in the strange
338 otherland language that Alec and Laura had never seen before but could somehow understand.

339 Laura said, “Well, I guess this is where we leave the main road.” A path diverged from
340 the Pilgrim’s Way to the right of the old sign. It was narrower than the main road, but flat and
341 well maintained. It disappeared into the forest, following the cliff.

342 Alec said, “We have a problem.” He pointed to another path diverging on the opposite
343 side of the sign, but running more or less parallel to the first. It curved and twisted, soon
344 disappearing into the forest. “Which one is ours?” Alec wondered. “Remember Rannu said we
345 had to choose the right road.” The sign stood midway between the two trails. There were no
346 arrows pointing in either direction.

347 Laura looked up one road, then the other. “This is the one,” she decided, pointing to the
348 right. “The Temple of the Sky juts off the side of the mountain so the road to it should follow
349 the cliff. And this road is on the right.”

350 “Makes sense,” said Alec.

351 “Quickly, we’re running out of time. We have to get to the Temple before sunset.” She
352 started down the road along the cliff edge.

353 They made good time through the forest. The path was narrow, but level and smooth. It
354 stayed a few metres back from the cliff. The shadows were growing longer.

355 “What’s that sound?” Alec asked, a few minutes later. They were walking swiftly along
356 the trail.

357 Laura said, “Must be a river, the one Trelu mentioned. There should be a bridge.”

358 It was indeed a river, and not a small one. It ran fast and deep, crossing the wide plateau
359 between a great waterfall far away on their left and another, loud but invisible, tumbling over the
360 cliff to their right. A stone bridge arched like a rainbow over the churning water. It was
361 supported by pillars jutting out of the shallows on either side. Marble statues of noble figures in
362 robes flanked the approach, a man on one side, a woman on the other.

363 Laura charged up the bridge with Alec close behind her. “Come on,” she urged, “we have
364 to get to the Temple before – AAAH!” She let out a scream. She stopped with one foot on the
365 bridge, the other stepping onto empty air. The centre of the bridge, at the top of the arch, simply
366 wasn’t there.

367 Laura’s momentum carried her forward. She flailed about, falling. Alec grabbed her near
368 arm and yanked, throwing his own weight onto his back foot. Laura wobbled on the edge, then
369 tumbled backward, pulling Alec with her. They fell hard against a low wall a few metres back
370 from the edge.

371 “Ow!” Laura shouted.

372 “Are you all right?” Alec asked, worried.

373 She took a deep breath. “Yeah. Yes, I’m fine. That was too close.”

374 “If you had fallen in . . . that waterfall” He didn’t finish.

375 Laura said, “Alec, you can let go of me now.”

376 “Oh, sorry.” He let her go. “You’re bleeding!”

377 Laura held up her right hand. A long gash across the back was bleeding profusely.

378 “Ohmygosh, I must have cut it on the rock.”

379 “I think, I think, it probably looks worse than it is. Does it hurt?”

380 “It does now.”

381 Alec said, “We need a bandage.” He looked about. After a moment he said, “Let’s try
382 this.” He yanked ferociously at the sleeve of the bandit’s shirt until the stitching gave way and
383 the sleeve fell loose. He wrapped it tight around Laura’s hand, then tied a knot. “How’s that?”
384 he asked.

385 She held up her wounded hand. The yellow and black material was turning red. “It will
386 do for now,” she said.

387 They climbed to their feet and approached the lip of the broken bridge. The gap was too
388 wide to jump. Down below, water swirled around great stones that had once been the bridge
389 deck. Alec said, “It must have collapsed ages ago. Durban said no one had come through since
390 his grandmother.”

391 Laura sighed. “So that’s what Trelu meant by that crack about some bridges pass under
392 water. Gallows humour from a thief.”

393 “He could have just told us,” Alec growled.

394 Laura was already trotting down the bridge. “We have to go back,” she said, “and
395 quickly. The sun is almost down.” The pair hurried back the way they had come. It was not too
396 soon that they arrived back at the fork and the ambiguous sign.

397 “I get it,” Alec said. “Instead of repairing the bridge they built a new road, following a
398 different route. That way.” He gestured toward the trail to the left of the sign.

399 Laura agreed. “That’s what Rannu meant: The right road isn’t the right road, it’s the left
400 one. Why does everyone here talk in riddles?”

401 “We’d better get going.”

402 “Wait a minute. We should mark this path. So other travellers won’t make the same
403 mistake.”

404 Alec grinned. “I’ve got this,” he said. He pulled off his garish striped shirt. He tied the
405 remaining sleeve to a tree on one side of the trail, then tied the sash to a tree on the other side.
406 “Can’t make it any clearer than that,” he remarked.

407 They headed down the other path, almost at a trot. Unlike the older road, this one was
408 narrow, winding and rough underfoot. They tripped over rocks and roots, pushed their way
409 through drooping branches and climbed over fallen trees. The light began to fade into the
410 softness of evening.

411 “We’re almost there,” Alec exclaimed, breathless. “But we still have to cross the river. I
412 hope there’s a better bridge.”

413 Indeed, they could already hear the roar of the river and its twin falls, growing steadily
414 louder as they approached. The path had veered far away from the cliff face, toward the rockwall
415 on the upper side. Soon it pressed close against it.

416 When they arrived at the river, the travellers received another shock. There was no
417 bridge. Instead, an undercut carved into the cliff face provided a wet, slippery path, barely half a
418 metre wide, directly beneath the waterfall.

419 Alec stared into the narrow passageway, walled by rock on one side, falling water on the
420 other. Spray from the waterfall wetted his face. “This is not what I was hoping for,” he said. He
421 had to raise his voice over the thundering of the water.

422 Laura said, “We have to go through. There’s not much time. But . . . it’s so narrow.”

423 Alec said, “Narrow but not very long. We’ll walk sideways. Keep a hand on the wall on
424 either side.”

425 "I can't," Laura replied. She held up her bandaged hand.

426 Alec said, "Rats, forgot about that. All right, let's try this. Face the wall, like this. Put
427 your arm around my waist. I'll be your right arm, you'll be my left. Got it?"

428 "Yes, I see what you mean." She stepped into the passage after Alec, facing the wall. She
429 put her right arm around his waist, delicately, so as not to hurt her bandaged hand. Alec put his
430 left hand around Laura's waist. It occurred to him then that he had imagined having his arms
431 around Laura a hundred times, but never quite like this.

432 "Ready?" said Alec. "Let's go!" They began to move sideways through the tunnel, two
433 hands on the wall, four feet carefully stepping across the wet floor.

434 "It's so loud!" Laura shouted, over the roar of the cascade.

435 "Watch your footing!" Alec shouted back. The floor was as slippery as they had feared.
436 The smooth wall provided little to hold onto. They made slow progress across the river. Laura
437 slipped more than once, but Alec's arm was there to catch her before she fell.

438 "Hang on," he shouted, after the second time. "We're almost there – WHOOPS!" His
439 right foot slipped out from under him, pitching him back toward the waterfall.

440 Laura cried out in pain. "My hand!" But she managed to shift her weight to push Alec
441 sideways, along the path. Alec felt cold water drench his face, then he and Laura were falling
442 again, into a surprisingly soft bed of big yellow flowers. They lay there for a few moments,
443 recovering.

444 Alec looked back. Water was crashing down a few feet from his shoes. His hair and face
445 were sopping wet. "We made it," he remarked. "I really wish they would fix that bridge."

446 Laura said, "Alec, you can let go of me now."

447 "Oh, right." He pulled his arm away, blushing.

448 The pair climbed to their feet. Laura said, "Remember how Trelu said that some rivers
449 pass over bridges? This is what he meant. I really don't like that man."

450 Alec noticed the long shadows. "The sun is almost down. Come on!"

451 The pair trotted down the path away from the river. They didn't have far to go. Up close,
452 the rocky projection that Abba had pointed out from the meadow was a broad plaza atop an
453 outcropping of the cliff. Long ago it had been shaped into an open-air temple. Alec and Laura
454 entered through a tall archway of white stone guarded by a second set of robed statues. There
455 were more statues within. The floor beyond was smooth as polished marble, inlaid with patches

456 of blue and green that echoed the land and lake below. A row of white marble pillars, topped by
457 a gilded beam, curved gracefully around the outside edge of the temple, open only at the most
458 distant point.

459 The sun was setting behind the lake, carving golden streaks across the water. Sunlight
460 poured through the gap in the balustrade to illuminate the smooth cliff behind them. The
461 sunlight lit up a dozen faces carved into the cliff face, all of wise-seeming men and women.
462 Some were gazing upwards. Others looked directly out at Laura and Alec, watching like judges.
463 Gemstones set in the cliff sparkled in the evening light. “It’s beautiful,” Laura said.

464 Alec looked around. “What are we supposed to do now?” he wondered. He approached
465 the opening at the far end of the cliff. A powerful updraft lifted his wet hair. “That must be a
466 thousand foot fall,” he said. “Abba said we would know what to do when we got here. Are we
467 supposed to just . . . jump?” The view downward was vertiginous.

468 Laura came up beside him. Light from the setting sun illuminated her face like an angel
469 in a Renaissance painting. Understanding was upon her. “It’s a leap of faith,” she said.

470 “Faith? What do you mean? Faith in what?”

471 “Abba said that to go home we have to fall up instead of down. That requires faith. Faith
472 that Abba and Durban were telling the truth and not playing a cruel trick on a couple of strangers.
473 Faith that there is order in the universe, that life is after all a beautiful gift; and that all things are
474 possible if we open our minds to wonder.”

475 “And if our faith is misplaced . . . we’re doing something utterly foolish.”

476 “Which you have already done once today. And look where it got you!” She spread her
477 arms wide to take in the strange and wonderful world around them.

478 “How – how did you know I jumped in?”

479 She graced him with an indulgent smile. “Alec, you were nowhere near the edge of the
480 hole.”

481 Alec blushed again. Then he looked out over the beautiful, unfamiliar land, toward the
482 setting sun. He thought of his friends at school, his younger sister, his hard-working father,
483 demanding but devoted. “We have to go,” he decided. He carefully measured five paces back
484 from the edge. He took Laura’s good left hand in his right. “We’ll jump together,” he said.

485 Laura said, “Before we go, I want to tell you something.”

486 He looked concerned. “What?”

487 “This has been a pretty good first date.”

488 Alec grinned. “All right, on three. One . . . two . . . three!” Hand in hand the young
489 couple ran forward five paces and leapt into the unknown.

490 Alec awakened to the soft chime of a bell. He raised his head from his desk and looked
491 around. Students were standing, packing up their books, chatting to one another. Mrs. Grearson
492 was glaring at him.

493 “Did you have a nice nap?” someone asked, grinning. Friends and classmates laughed.

494 Alec looked down at the floor. It was intact, solid, unmarked by any scar of a giant
495 sinkhole. No desks or chairs were missing. The bulletin board hung on the uncracked wall,
496 bordered by yellow and black striped tape like a neon sign. Everything in his world was as it
497 should have been.

498 He looked around to find Laura. She was standing among a group of her friends, who
499 were sharing a laugh at Alec dozing off in class. Laura wasn’t laughing. She looked at Alec,
500 wondering, then down at the long, thin scar across the back of her perfect right hand.

501

