

The M▲gic C▲lend▲r

Joshua Quinn

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Brett Discovers a New World

Adventure is a curious thing. Sometimes you have to go searching someplace beyond the horizon to find it. Sometimes adventure will come knocking at your front door. And, sometimes, adventure will even arrive uninvited at your door with a sledgehammer to tear it down without warning.

Most people do not like adventure. They would never attempt to find it. If adventure is blocking their path, they will take as wide of a detour as they possibly can to get around it. If adventure is at their door, they will pretend to not be home. And if adventure breaks in through the front door, they will simultaneously dash out the back.

On the other hand, there are some who are willing to partake in adventures. These people realize that adventure is dangerous and best avoided, however, if adventure is trying to tackle them to the floor they will fight back, whereas most others will run away instead. These people are known as “adventurers”.

This is a story about a boy who had an adventure. No, he was not an adventurer, but he was soon going to become one. He did not set off to a place beyond the horizon with the notion of finding adventure. He was not offered an invitation to have an adventure. And adventure did not force its company upon him. Rather, he stumbled across adventure quite by accident.

Brett Parkender, an energetic young boy of twelve, was this boy. Adventure was one matter he could never seem to make up his mind about. One half of him did not want adventure. “Life is best when everything is normal and there are no strange or traumatizing events to shake you. Change is frightening and adventures are too risky,” he explained to himself.

The second half of Brett was starved for adventure. “An adventure offers the chance for courage. You are already twelve years old, and you have not had *any* adventures or *any* stunning incidents or *any* miracles happen to you at all! If you went on an adventure you would have shocking stories to tell your friends. You would no longer be a simple and uninteresting boy but a boy whose life has been shaped by adventures and miracles,” the other side of Brett declared.

Neither side of Brett was willing to compromise its view concerning adventure. So the battle raged on for many months. These two sides of Brett were constantly bickering with each other.

“I sure hope there are no adventures around the next corner,” moaned the first side.

“Nonsense! If adventure befalls me, I will be the luckiest boy on Earth!” the second side claimed.

“Adventures are dangerous. Any fool would look for them.”

“Don’t you wish something exciting would happen? Life is getting dull and boring here.”

“Dull and boring is far better than peril. Adventures always end in disaster. Do you remember what happened to Uncle Timothy? He is your only relative who ever had an adventure. Shortly after joining the military he was reported missing in action. That was six months ago and he still isn’t back. If you have an adventure you will surely end up like him.”

“Adventure comes in many types. His adventure was a military adventure; I am not looking for a military adventure. I am looking for an adventure of a different sort.”

“There is only one type of adventure and that is a precarious one.”

Brett could never come to a conclusion on the matter. Life continued on as usual with nothing unusual along the road. And the first side of Brett was always apprehensive that life was going to change, while the second side of Brett was always disappointed that nothing was changing.

Sometimes he prayed to God that something extraordinary would occur, and sometimes he begged that God spare him from any pending adventures. Was adventure good or bad? Since Brett was so torn on the issue, he finally decided to ask his dad.

It was a typical summer evening in early July. Sitting around the tiny kitchen table over a crispy chicken salad, his family was engaged in a very typical dinner conversation. Brett anxiously waited for a gap of silence during which he could bring up his question. He had to wait a bit longer than he would have liked, but he eventually had the opportunity he sought.

“Dad—is adventure a good thing or a bad thing?”

Brett’s dad, Matthew, was a tall yet quiet man who had a young appearance for his age. His hair was brown and bushy, and his dark eyebrows cleanly arched over his hazel-colored eyes. He worked long hours seated in a cubicle at an office where he wrote computer programs for a software company. Every morning he would awake extra early so that he could spare the time to walk to work instead of drive. “If you’re in a job where you’re sitting all day, you’ve got to keep up with your exercise,” he would often say. Living in Michigan meant he often had to take an umbrella with him. With umbrella in one hand and his lunch in the other, Matthew would trudge four blocks through the busy streets of Lakefall until he arrived at his office. Shortly before dinner each evening, he would hike all the way back, pausing at the local store to pick up the newspaper along the way. He was casually sprinkling cheese on his salad at the time when Brett spoke up.

Surprise came over Matthew’s face, then he exchanged glances with his wife, Lynda. “Well, Brett, there are a great many factors that determine how good or bad an adventure is,” he stated after a long silence. “I’ll have to think about it for a while before I can give you a straightforward answer.”

Nothing more was said on the topic that night, and Brett felt somewhat unsatisfied. Perhaps the topic of adventure was on his mind because of all the fantasy stories he had recently read. It was true that Brett was highly absorbed with the surreal elements of fantasy fiction. If he had an adventure, he might become like the undaunted and crafty characters who fought dragons, raced across crumbling bridges, and resisted the temptations of black magic.

Instead of possessing a love for fantasy novels, Brett’s eleven-year-old sister, Micha, preferred what Brett called “boring and pointless biographies”. Both Brett and Micha dedicated much of their time to reading, but the books that the two read differed greatly from each other. Whenever the Parkenders visited the library, Brett would make a beeline for the fantasy section on the second floor. By contrast, Micha would spend her time perusing the non-fiction aisle.

Micha’s passion for books was as great as her mother’s passion for painting. Lynda was a lively woman, almost as tall as her husband and with hair alike to Matthew’s, except that it was much longer. Her color-riddled paint shirt doubled as an apron when she was cooking. Once every five minutes she would hop up from her chair to tend to the food on the stove; then she would return to her unfinished painting. Sometimes she would even place her miniature tabletop easel on the kitchen counter so she could paint with her right hand and flip pancakes with her left. This behavior would not surprise anyone who knew that Lynda had two degrees in art. She kept her art easel set up in the sun room and would spend hours perfecting each masterpiece. Although she sold or gave away most of her paintings, Lynda had a few pictures that she kept to

hang in the upstairs hall. She also had several pictures painted by her mother and grandmother. But there was one painting in particular that Lynda treasured—a self-portrait of her great-grandmother, Josephine Hayes. This painting had more value to her than any of the other paintings that she possessed, and it proudly hung in the hallway downstairs. This special picture had been passed down through her family, until it came to Lynda, who had now been the owner of it for three years. Lynda continuously polished its gold-colored frame until it shone as if it was the most precious thing in the world.

Brett himself had some interest in art as well, though he spent more of his time on pencil sketches than on paintings. One afternoon, Brett lay stretched out across the floor with colored pencils scattered in front of him as well as a large sheet of paper. He had been working on a drawing of a dragon over the course of the past two days. The picture was very elaborate and detailed, and Brett could not help but smile at how good it was turning out. The dragon had dark green scales and shiny claws the color of muddy water. On its large head were two intimidating yellow eyes—not a bright yellow, but a stale, yucky yellow. The mouth boasted huge, glossy white teeth, which stuck out like the teeth of an alligator. The creature had tiny ears, and significant brown horns to crown its head. Powerful limbs were at the sides of the body, and a tail twisted from the back end like a bending tree trunk.

What remained was the scenery. Leaving a plain white background behind such a magnificent dragon seemed an unacceptable idea. Brett picked up a gray pencil and slowly began to sketch a rocky terrain behind the creature. After a while, he added some gigantic mountains along the horizon and colored in the sky. His masterpiece complete, he signed his name in the lower right corner with a black pen. Beside his signature, he also wrote the date: July 11, 2009.

“It’s some ferocious dragon,” Brett grinned. “I sure wouldn’t want to meet that in real life.”

It was at that point that Brett’s mother walked into the room. “Brett, I’m going to be—oh, did you make that?” she interrupted herself.

“Yes,” replied Brett, “I just finished it.”

“How long have you been working on that picture?”

“About two days. Why?”

“I’m amazed—it’s very interesting. You should get it framed!”

“Really? You think it’s *that* good?” marveled Brett.

“Certainly. Keep up the good work!” Lynda exclaimed. “I have some errands to run. You and your sister can stay home.”

Brett followed his mom down the stairs and into the hallway by the front door. Micha was also there.

“Don’t answer the phone unless the caller ID shows that it’s me or your dad. Don’t answer the door. And be careful around the stove—it might still be a bit hot. I was brewing some tea a few minutes ago. We don’t want you burning yourselves, right?”

With those words spoken, Lynda walked out the door, climbed into the car, slowly pulled out of the driveway, and disappeared down the road.

“You know, Micha,” began Brett, who had been thinking of his picture, “Wouldn’t it be cool if—if—trolls and unicorns and giants and dragons were real?”

Micha scowled. “Maybe unicorns.” She then started shuffling up the stairs.

She was only halfway up when Brett cut in, “Really. Don’t you think it would be neat?”

Micha said nothing.

“Where are you going?” Brett wondered.

“To read a book.”

Micha continued up the steps. Brett was now alone. With nothing to do and his drawing already completed, Brett became rather bored. A long and awkward silence set in. For three whole minutes, Brett stood in the downstairs hallway without saying a word. The sound of a clock ticking or a refrigerator humming would have made the house sound noisy when compared with the current silence.

Finally, Brett murmured to himself, “It would be cool. What if—dragons *were* real? Maybe...” There was an extremely long pause. “Dragons are real.”

The moment he said this, something amazing happened. Something far more amazing than what the adventure-craving half of Brett hoped for in its wildest dreams. Something shocking enough to make the adventure-phobic half of Brett scream. Something that would change Brett’s life forever.

The painting of Josephine Hayes, which hung in solitude on the wall adjacent to Brett, started to change. A large and noticeable smudge formed across the woman’s face. Another smudge across her scarf began traveling in the opposite direction. The colors in the painting were swirling round and round. Color merged with color; the paints blended together; soon the paints began to change color as they swirled; the tans and browns had already turned into blues and greens.

All of this happened in less than five seconds. The painting of Josephine Hayes had morphed into a photograph of a grassy meadow. The grass was a vivid green and the blue of the sky overhead was mixed with the gold of sunshine in spring. A tiny tree stood within the bounds of the frame.

Brett did not realize it, but his heart was beating twice its usual speed. His jaw dropped and he stood frozen and stared. “This is impossible! Am I dreaming?” he thought. He knew right away that the answer to this question was no. It was a bright and fresh day and Brett felt wide awake. He paced up and down the hallway, analyzing the picture from different angles. Perhaps his eyes were playing tricks on him. As he viewed the picture from the right, he realized that he could see more grassy meadow to the left, and as he viewed the picture from the left, more meadow was revealed on the right. It was as if the picture changed depending on his viewpoint—as if it were not a picture but a window!

Brett stood directly in front of the frame, wide-eyed and tense. He slowly extended his finger to touch it. The moment his fingertip came in contact with the glass, a large ripple quivered outwards as if the glass were made of water. Stunned, Brett jerked his arm back. Such was his surprise that he began to feel a bit weak in the legs. After a moment, he gathered enough courage to touch the strange thing again. This time, he swiped his hand across the surface of the glass. Upon doing so, he realized his fingers had gone right through it!

“My word! What on Earth is this?” Brett gasped.

Now he stuck his entire arm into the frame. As he shifted his arm, many ripples appeared in the glass. Once again, he stood back and glared at the picture, dumbfounded. How was this possible?

Then Brett did something he had never dreamed of doing. He stepped forward and crawled right through the frame. The bottom of the frame was about three feet from the floor, but it was not difficult to climb in. Beneath his hands he could feel the soft blades of grass. They seemed too real to be a dream. The sun in his face was too bright to be imaginary. If this was no dream and no illusion, what was it?

Confusion still loomed over him. What exactly was this unexplainable phenomenon?

Only one viable conclusion remained—it was a miracle.

Brett stood up. The scene looked even grander now that he was in it! Behind him there was a large green hill with a rectangular hole in its side. The hole appeared to be covered with glass like a window. Behind that glass, he could see the hallway and the stairs.

All was peaceful and welcoming in the meadow. A bright yellow butterfly fluttered past. Brett bent forward and plucked a rich, crisp leaf off the tree to examine. Afterwards, he dropped it and watched the leaf descend to the ground. He was enthralled with everything around him, but his mind always wandered back to the question, “How did it happen?” Was there something magical about his mother’s picture? And did magic really exist? Brett was now convinced that the answer was yes.

So much had happened in such little time. It was overwhelming for Brett to comprehend all of these new discoveries. They had come upon him with such spontaneity. Slowly, he scanned his eyes across all of his surroundings. What he beheld was very fascinating and real.

“This place is full of color,” Brett observed. “I shall name it Colorful Meadow.”

Feeling quite satisfied with the name, he continued to look around. “I’ll never be missed if I’m only gone for twenty minutes,” he murmured to himself.

Brett looked back at the rectangular hole from which he had come. “Yes,” he resolved, “I will explore for a short while, and then I will go back home.”

But, of course, his adventure-phobic side was there to rebuke him immediately. “You will explore for a short while, fall into some ghastly pit, and die!” the voice roared.

“You will explore for a short while, and get caught up into a miraculous, life-changing adventure,” his other side calmly answered.

“And do you really want that?”

“Of course.”

“Once your life has been changed, it is changed. There is no going back.”

Brett froze. “My life has already been forever changed,” he solemnly declared. “I will explore for a short while—just a *short* while—and then I will go home.”

So Brett explored. Weaving his way between tall, green hills, he left the hole in the hill behind. The air was fresh, the sky was blue, and he felt a quiet sense of gladness. For the most joyous form of adventure is in traveling through beautiful lands unknown.

Although his adventure-phobic side continued to wail bitterly at his adventure craving-side, which had for the moment won the battle, the former voice grew less persistent, and eventually all worries were forgotten. Thus, Brett ventured on—not knowing that so many adventures lay before him.

2

Mr. Knowledge

A breeze began to stir, cooling Brett, who had been rather sweaty from the heat of the sun. It had been nearly ten minutes since Brett stepped through the picture frame. For his entire hike he had seen nothing but grassy, rolling hills no matter which direction he gazed. The only tree he had spotted was the lonely one in front of the rectangle-shaped hole.

The hills ahead of him seemed endless. Like waves in the ocean, they curved up and down unceasingly. Whenever Brett crested one hill, he would notice another one just ahead. However, he did not mind the endless hills. The warm sunshine combined with the refreshing breeze and the enchanting scenery raised his spirits.

Finally, upon reaching the top of a certain hill, Brett did find something new and different. A tall black pillar rose from the ground in the distance. Although he was unsure as to what the object was, curiosity got the better of him and he decided to proceed with the objective of investigating the thing.

Before long it was obvious that the pillar was a tower. This was not a modern skyscraper, but instead had a rustic appearance. Five stories high and wide as a small house, the tower had a parapet along its top edges and several small windows on its four walls. It was constructed mostly out of darkly-stained wood.

Brett sat down on the side of a hill. Whether or not the tower was inhabited was unclear from its guise. If the structure was no longer in use, it had to have been abandoned recently due to its fine condition. For a while he sat wondering if he should indeed search the place as he had originally intended. As he pondered to himself, fears started to dominate his mind. He worried that the entrance he had crawled through would disappear as spontaneously as it had appeared. Then he would be trapped in this place forever.

On the other hand, if he returned home now, he might never have a chance to explore again. Curiosity was nagging at him. What was this tower? What was inside the tower? What was beyond the tower?

"I have already gone this far, so why shouldn't I go on the rest of the way?" Brett told himself. Thus, he got to his feet and resumed his hike with a quickened pace.

Until now, the grass beneath his bare feet had been a dazzling green, but upon nearing the tower, Brett perceived that the grass had changed to a duller shade. As he traveled onward, the grass ahead of him progressed from dull to wilting to dead. Eventually, Brett tread on bare ground, which surrounded the tower like a ring. It was as if the delicate grass was less capable of flourishing the closer it grew to the massive structure.

Brett had to circle the tower before he found the door. It was made of the same wood as the rest of the tower, which made it easy to miss. In the center of the door was an elegantly fashioned brass doorknocker.

For a moment Brett paused, staring at the tower and craning his neck to view the top. Then he took hold of the doorknocker and gave it several raps. He resolved that if nobody answered he would simply push the door open and explore uninvited.

To his surprise, somebody did answer. "Come in, I've been expecting you," spoke a calm voice on the other side of the door.

Baffled, Brett opened the door and stepped inside. On his right was the beginning of a wooden staircase, and on his left was a quaint little kitchen with an unlit fireplace along one wall and a counter along the other. An incredibly low table rested in the center of the floor, and a rocking chair stood adjacent to the door that Brett had come through. An old man was seated in the rocker. His white beard grew down to the center of his chest, and the hair on his head was neatly combed. He wore a brown shirt made of thin cotton, and his smooth, tan pants had buttons which were fashioned from wood.

Immediately, the man stood up and approached Brett, looking him over rather thoroughly. The man's eyes took in the bright red t-shirt, the faded blue jeans, and the messy brown hair of his young guest. Finally, he stared at Brett's eyes. His glance was not at all penetrating or challenging, but instead felt shallow. However, the smile on his face was apparent, and he warmly shook hands with Brett as if strangers came to his house everyday. "Welcome, my friend!" he announced. "I am Mr. Unlimited F. Knowledge. I know of everything from where the sun rises to where the sun sets in this world, and of everything upon the surface of your world. I know of everything you think, everything you say, and everything you do. I already know what your name is, but it is polite to introduce oneself, so now may I ask what your name happens to be?"

The man had blurted out so many words at once. Brett did not fully comprehend what he had just heard. After a moment, he replied with a touch of uncertainty, "My name is Brett Parkender."

"That was a rather blunt answer," explained Mr. Knowledge. "Can you make your name sound a bit fancier? If I would have introduced myself as 'Unlimited Knowledge', that would have sounded dull. Therefore, I squeeze in my middle initial to richen my name up. Your middle name is Matthew, so add the 'M' in."

"How—how did you know that?" Brett stammered.

"See, what did I tell you?" laughed Mr. Knowledge. "What if I told you that your sister's name is Micha?"

Brett's mouth hung open. Perhaps this man really did know everything. "Do you know her middle name?" he quizzed.

"None other than Lillian," Mr. Knowledge promptly recited.

"How do you know all this?" Brett puzzled.

"Because," the man stated, "I have unlocked the secret to unlimited knowledge! I know everything there is to know. I am the one and only Mr. Knowledge, the Generous Giver of Knowledge and the Proud Provider of Sound Advice. You are fortunate to have found me, as I know you have many unanswered questions. I am here to answer them for you."

A brief silence fell over the room. Finally, Brett asserted, "If you know everything, then surely you can explain how I arrived here."

"Yes, I figured you would ask that," began Mr. Knowledge. "First you must understand that you are not inside of a picture frame. The frame was merely a portal. You have discovered not only a new world, but also a new universe. Or at least it is new to you. This is the Land of Good Fortune. Every once in a great while, a certain lucky individual will receive access to this land. The transformation of your mother's picture frame into a portal was indeed spontaneous. You are very fortunate. You are among the few who are lucky."

"What kind of good fortune does this land have to offer?" Brett questioned.

"I am glad you asked," smiled Mr. Knowledge. "This land was not always a land of Good Fortune. Long ago, it was a land overrun by dragons. As you may already know, dragons are

collectors of fine materials. They lust after gold and silver and they crave diamonds and rubies. Sometimes they blast mountains apart with their breath to search for precious stones that are buried in the ground.

“For a thousand years, the people of the land were terrorized and perpetually robbed by these greedy creatures. Then I entered the world. I started out as an ordinary man, but at a young age, I chose to look inside myself and unleash my inner strength. The race of dragons was already fading, however, many feared that they would repopulate. I spent thirty years traveling across the planet in search of dragons to slay. Today I can assure you that they are indeed extinct and now the entire world is bright and peaceful.”

These words upset Brett, as he admired dragons and did not like the idea of their extermination. He also felt that Mr. Knowledge had made some rather humanistic assertions. Brett had always been taught that strength comes from God, not from within himself.

“The dragons may be gone, but their hoards still remain mostly untouched,” continued Mr. Knowledge. “That is why this is the Land of Good Fortune. There are hundreds of hoards throughout the world, and no man has claims to any of them. And since I have all knowledge, I know the exact locations of every hoard. The nearest one is less than two days away. You could return home as a millionaire.”

Brett pondered the implications of what he had just heard. He had discovered a land of treasure. Within a few days, he could return home with enough diamonds and jewels to make even King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon jealous! The Parkender Family would purchase a mansion by the shores of Lake Superior with a Porsche parked in their ten-car garage and a private yacht docked by the shore. Only one stipulation held Brett back.

“I would love to set off for there, but my parents will be terrified if they find me gone,” he acknowledged.

“There is one matter concerning the Land of Good Fortune of which I did not inform you,” answered Mr. Knowledge, “and that is the matter of time. Time flows at a much faster speed in this world. Consequently, if you are gone for four days here, you will only be gone for one and a half hours there.”

“Really?” Brett grew excited.

“Yes. I know it to be true,” replied the old man. He paused. “Would you like to come upstairs with me? There are soft chairs we can sit back in.”

Brett agreed, so the two began the ascent up the four stories of steps. The staircase was built of fine, polished wood and was wide enough for both Brett and Mr. Knowledge to walk comfortably alongside each other. Occasionally they would pass a window on their right, each of which offered a splendid view. They were only a quarter of the way up the stairs when Mr. Knowledge halted at a door on their left and shoved it open. A modern-looking bathroom with a beautiful tile floor was revealed.

“Do not accept the common but mistaken idea that living in the middle of nowhere means you cannot take advantage of modern conveniences,” Mr. Knowledge informed. “When you have boundless knowledge, you can find a way around any problem. Although I had never installed plumbing before, I was able to do so because of my knowledge. The other people of this world are primitive and do not have toilets or running water. By contrast, my tower is furnished with many luxuries which are associated with your world. There is an electric generator running on the roof, and this powers my microwave oven and my refrigerator. I have a television set and a DVD player in my bedroom, although I do not receive any channels.”

“A microwave oven?” Brett puzzled. “Did you build it yourself?”

“With my unlimited knowledge, I certainly could have built it myself,” responded Mr. Knowledge. “However, it takes no small amount of time and bother to build one. Instead, I buy most of my things from stores in your world. I have the knowledge to portal myself to your world whenever I like; in fact, I have spent many a day living there. Ultimately, I chose the Land of Good Fortune as my permanent residence, but I still visit Earth frequently to buy things I need—such as microwave ovens, television sets, refrigerators, and electric generators.”

Mr. Knowledge and Brett continued upwards. As they climbed, they also peeked into the laundry room and the bedroom. The staircase followed the perimeter of the tower, and each room was in the middle, stacked on top of the previous room. They were finally nearing the uppermost room, Mr. Knowledge’s study.

Presently, Mr. Knowledge began traveling up the steps at a much slower pace, lagging behind Brett who was bounding upward rather quickly. After a brief time, Brett cast a glance over his shoulder and realized that Mr. Knowledge was not following him at all. The old man stood frozen, staring at him with a strange, sad expression. As soon as Brett looked him in the eye, Mr. Knowledge’s gaze darted to the floor and he seemed ashamed.

“Is something the matter, Mr. Knowledge?”

Regaining his composure immediately, the old man climbed up the stairs toward Brett. “No, nothing at all,” he smiled. “Everyone has a thought cross their mind that shouldn’t be there, every now and then, don’t they?”

The two continued up the staircase. When they had almost reached the study at the top, Brett stumbled over one of the steps and caught himself. He was rubbing at his sore knees while Mr. Knowledge stood beside him and watched.

“You had better be careful on these steps, friend,” he warned. “If you took a tumble, there would not be a bone in your body left unbroken when you reached the bottom.”

In the nearest corner of the study were grouped together several hand-made sofas and chairs. A wooden desk stood in the back of the room. There were two bookcases along one wall, side by side, and many ancient-looking, hard cover books proudly lined the shelves.

“Have a seat,” Mr. Knowledge politely offered. Brett made himself comfortable in one of the large, cushy chairs. Mr. Knowledge sat down in a chair opposite Brett.

“Mr. Knowledge, why do you live in a tower?”

“Why do you live in Lakefall?”

Brett did not fail to be amazed when Mr. Knowledge said this. “Well—my dad...” Brett started.

“You mean Matthew?” Mr. Knowledge cut in.

“Yes, he’s a computer programmer. Do you know what a computer is?”

“I most certainly do! Never doubt me, Brett. I know what a computer is. I know everything,” declared Mr. Knowledge with pride.

“We live in Lakefall because that’s where my dad works,” continued Brett.

“Well, I live in this tower because it is my duty to help and guide travelers, like you. The reason for using a tower as my abode instead of an ordinary house is that towers can be seen from a greater distance. A tower is more likely to attract visitors who are lost. I must see to it that the arrivals find me so I can lead them to their good fortunes.” Mr. Knowledge leaned back in his chair. “My life in this tower is a simple one. Visitors are seldom, thus I pass the time by reading and re-reading books from my collection. Sometimes I will pick up paper and pen, and write about all that I have done, or I will write down my thoughts and ideas and make myself notes.”

For a while there was silence. “You do not have to sit there with your mouth sealed,” Mr.

Knowledge told Brett. "Ask as many questions as you please. That is what I am here for."

Brett nodded. "Your name is Unlimited F. Knowledge. What does the 'F' stand for?" he inquired.

"The 'F' stands for 'Freely-Given'. I give my unlimited knowledge freely for the benefit of others, such as you."

"I see..." Brett fidgeted in his seat. "And does your unlimited knowledge span into the future?"

The old man froze. "No. But someday it will. Because I have unlimited knowledge of the past and present, I have used that knowledge to figure out how I can also attain knowledge of the future. But the time is not right yet. There is a Thing that can grant me future knowledge. As of right now it has an owner and is fervently guarded. So I am waiting for an opportunity when I can take this Thing as my own. Until that day, I will have to be content with knowledge of merely the past and present."

These words were intriguing to Brett. "What is this Thing that you want?"

"It is nothing that concerns you. Boys like you should not stick their noses into other people's businesses."

The two once again sat back in silence.

"I would offer you a mug of hot tea, if it were not such a baking hot day," Mr. Knowledge remarked. "Would you settle for a glass of water?"

"Sure, thank you," Brett responded.

Mr. Knowledge rose from his chair. "I will be back shortly."

Brett sat alone. He began to pay more attention to his surroundings. The desk in the back of the room had several huge stacks of old papers and a number of pens lying about. The wood floor beneath his feet featured a handsome, well-crafted rug. Above him on the ceiling was a drop-down door and ladder.

At that moment, Brett saw something that caught his interest. Nearby a little wooden shelf was hammered into the wall. Old coins, decorative badges, and other trinkets were among the shelf's contents. However, there was one object that was much different from the others. It was a small triangle made of solid gold; about half an inch thick, and with each side of the triangle about two inches in length. There was no writing etched, embossed, or painted on it whatsoever, and the edges and corners of this triangle were dull and rounded.

Brett arose from his seat and picked it up. Miraculously, the gold was not heavy at all. It now sat in the palm of his hand. He figured that he should return the triangle to its original resting place, but instead he slipped it into his pocket. He had no intentions of stealing this treasure, but he wanted to test the strange man's knowledge. Would Mr. Knowledge know that the triangle was missing and chastise him? Or perhaps Mr. Knowledge was a liar and did not know of his action?

Footsteps could be heard coming up the stairway. Quickly, Brett returned to his seat, as if he had never stood up at all. Mr. Knowledge appeared carrying a wooden tray with two tall glasses of water balanced on top. Brett grabbed one, and Mr. Knowledge took the other for himself, placing the empty tray on a tiny round table that was next to his chair.

The cool water was very refreshing, and Brett guzzled most of it down within seconds. Mr. Knowledge, on the other hand, carefully sipped his glass as if it were a steaming mug of tea.

"You are indeed such a clever boy," raved Mr. Knowledge, reclining in his chair. "I know of so many wonderful things about you—so many that I could make a list of them. You are quick-witted, intelligent, and amiable. You are relatively swift in speed. You can outrun all of

your friends, as well as your sister, who is actually quite speedy herself. I know how under-appreciated you are. Most people think you are an ordinary boy. Utter ridiculousness! Already you are greater than most. There is a vast pool of strength inside of you, and all you have to do is find it. Everyone has the power to create their own destiny, and you are no exception.

“Perhaps you could learn a lesson from my own example. My life is a testimony to how much you can change the world if you choose to believe in yourself. Many years ago, I discovered that I possessed a hidden power to know all things. Because I realized how great I was, I was able to utilize this ability to its full extent. And since I have this ability, I can pass it on to the rest of mankind. Someday the sun will set on the days of mystery and confusion. I call this the Day of Knowledge. On that glorious day, all men and women shall become like me. All barriers to knowledge will be lifted, and the world will be saved from chaos. Think of the implications of this, Brett. When the great day comes, mankind will have the knowledge to cure every disease, prevent every war, advance the fields of science, technology, medicine, politics, and so much more! All forms of misunderstanding, madness, and quarreling will vanish. Neighbors will have the knowledge to cooperate with one another. Crime levels will plummet, for thieves will not be able to carry out their plans in secret. Men will have the knowledge to stop every disaster, natural or man-made. The world will be saved. And all because I chose to believe in the power within me.”

Despite his thirst, Brett could not drink what little water remained in his glass. Uneasiness and shock had conquered his mind, heart, and stomach. The words of this madman deserved heavy objection! Brett could think of no nightmare worse than having every one of his actions, words, and thoughts known to everyone—even complete strangers!

“By giving the world unlimited knowledge, you will be destroying all forms of privacy and secrecy!” he retorted.

“Yes, but you do not get the point. The benefits of a world with boundless knowledge far outweigh the losses,” claimed Mr. Knowledge. “The advancement of knowledge is important enough that it will not matter if it is done at the expense of secrecy and privacy.”

“You yourself said that boys should not stick their noses into other people’s businesses. But when this Day of Knowledge comes, nosy people will be rewarded. Everyone will know everything about other people’s businesses!”

A look of annoyance came over Mr. Knowledge’s face. “You are correct,” he confessed, “but like I said before, the benefits outweigh the losses. When the Day of Knowledge arrives, you can say goodbye to destruction, discord, and death. My plan may gather skeptics, and apparently you are one of them. But people like you are not thinking deeply enough. In a world perfected by knowledge, nosiness will be acceptable and privacy will no longer matter. All men will be on equal grounds with each other because all of them will have the same unlimited knowledge.”

“I have more objections. Governments will use their unlimited knowledge to oppress and eliminate religions,” Brett stated defiantly.

“And rightfully so,” Mr. Knowledge argued, “for then all will know the truth, whatever it may be. All falsehoods will melt away. No sane person will uphold a religion of lies.”

“You do not need unlimited knowledge to comprehend the truth. Mankind will continue to believe what they want to, even if they know it to be false. Authorities will pick the religion they prefer and prosecute all who adhere to another one. Nobody will be able to pray to God silently without being caught.” Grief mixed with anger was causing Brett to sweat in his chair.

“You are right in what you say, but you overlook one detail. You assume that mankind is

prone to evil. But if all men and women fulfill their destinies, they will have the power to overcome their shortcomings. Mankind will have the desire to improve themselves and will not treat you badly. Because of me, your world will become like heaven!"

"That is impossible!" Brett erupted. "Knowledge alone cannot defeat sin. In order to defeat sin, all sinners must die. But God did not want mankind to die, so He took the form of a man, piled the sins of the entire world onto His own shoulders, and died in our place. Thus, sin was paid for and defeated. You make yourself out to be the savior of the world, but in reality Jesus Christ was!"

Mr. Knowledge's face became as gray as stone. Suddenly, he let out a hoarse laugh, and his face returned to normal, though he still appeared nervous. "Jesus Christ is a real historical person, but how do you know that He died for your sins? How is He any different than the countless other martyrs of religions?"

"The Bible says that Jesus died for the sins of the world."

"But how do you know that the Bible is valid?"

"Jesus said it was."

"But how do you know Jesus was a truth-teller?"

"The Bible says He was."

Mr. Knowledge laughed. "Do you see now? You are using circular reasoning. You are using the Bible to prove its own validity. This is not acceptable. Why do you believe in Christianity? I know why. Because that was what you were raised to believe. And you refuse to believe anything else, whether it is the truth or not. When the day of Knowledge comes, you will know and understand that I have told you the truth. The truth is that God had no incentive to destroy sin. God is too big and important to care about your problems. Thus, it is up to us humans to prove to Him that we really are as strong and important as He is. Heaven is mere fantasy, but us humans can build a real heaven for ourselves if we have limitless knowledge."

Brett was bothered and angry inside, however, he remained silent for some time. He lifted his water glass to his mouth and tapped it to get the last drops to run in. Finally, he sat up straighter in his chair and said, "How are you capable of spreading your unlimited knowledge to all of mankind?"

"It is actually quite simple," replied Mr. Knowledge. "There exists a phrase known as Illian's Secret. If you utter this phrase, you can transfer any abilities or powers that you possess to anyone you like. This magical secret has only been used twice during history. I can make the Day of Knowledge come whenever I like, but the time is not right yet. Thus, I wait."

Perplexed and uneasy, Brett felt his head spin due to the outlandish information he had received. So many revelations had been presented to him in such a short period of time. If the Day of Knowledge could be prevented, he would be more than relieved.

"What an extensive and interesting conversation we have had!" Mr. Knowledge grinned. "Although we certainly have some differences in our beliefs, I nevertheless have great respect for you and enjoyed our little debate together. I did not mean to ridicule your religion or vex you. I was merely pointing out what I knew to be true."

Brett had no response to this.

"I am sure you will enjoy a detailed description of my dragon-slaying adventures many years ago," Mr. Knowledge began, changing the topic. "I started my endeavor when I was twenty, and finally fulfilled this quest when I was fifty. Then I immediately set to work on building my tower and settled here. During those thirty years, not only did I search for and kill many dragons, but I also explored nearly the entire planet and discovered many new and

amazing things. Of course, if I had already acquired my unlimited knowledge back then, the quest would have been much easier and exploration would have been unnecessary. I set off from a small village and traveled across the entire land in a systematic fashion. As I traveled, I found that food was scarce, though water was abundant. When you are trekking the globe as I did, you encounter hundreds of challenges.”

Mr. Knowledge continued to jabber on about his explorations, boasting of things he had done, creatures he had outwitted, and places he had discovered. Brett was very uninterested, and barely listened to the details of Mr. Knowledge’s stories. Brett felt terribly drowsy and bored.

After what seemed like an hour, Mr. Knowledge abruptly quit his prattling and stood up. “I will be right back, my fine friend. My master wants me.”

Brett hardly took notice of what the old man had just said. He watched Mr. Knowledge walk across the room to the descending staircase. Just then, Mr. Knowledge tripped over nothing and tumbled head-over-heels down the hard wood stairs. A sickening *thump, thump, thump* echoed into the room. Painful screaming filled Brett’s ears.

Despite his drowsiness, Brett was on his feet in an instant. He raced down the stairs after the tumbling man. His feet leapt over two steps at a time. “Mr. Knowledge! Oh! Oh!” Brett yelled.

Suddenly, the wooden staircase beneath his feet vanished and he was sitting in his chair in Mr. Knowledge’s study once more. The dreadful accident was but a nightmare.

The room was perfectly quiet, save for a gentle breeze that brushed the walls of the tower. Mr. Knowledge was nowhere to be seen or heard. Apparently Brett had fallen into slumber while Mr. Knowledge was talking about his explorations.

Brett was about to rise from his seat when he heard the sound of Mr. Knowledge climbing up the stairs. The man smiled. “Ah, you are awake again.”

Brett stood up. “I apologize for dozing off.”

“You do not have to be sorry,” replied Mr. Knowledge. “I am glad you got the rest you needed.”

“How long have I been asleep?”

“Two hours. I guess you should be on your way,” Mr. Knowledge advised. “After all, immense riches lie ahead of you.”

Brett frowned. “Mr. Knowledge? How do I know you are not lying when you say there is a treasure hoard?”

Mr. Knowledge was silent. He slowly strode to his desk in the back of the room, pulled the top drawer open, and reached his hand inside. What he revealed caused Brett’s jaw to drop. It was a bright red gem, as large as a baseball, and as smooth as polished glass. Red as blood, translucent, and shaped like a perfect diamond, the gem fascinated Brett with its beauty.

“If you follow my directions, I can guarantee you will find not one but many gems as splendid as this one. I have been to the nearest hoard myself. Do you intend to visit it?”

After a brief pause, Brett shifted his glance from the gem to Mr. Knowledge and blurted out, “Yes, I think I will.”

Placing the gem in the desk drawer and sliding it shut, the man grinned. “Now listen carefully to my directions. Set out northwards from my tower and travel for exactly one day. Then make a sharp turn east and continue. Before long, you will reach a river. There is a bridge for you to cross, and on the other side is a dense jungle. As you hike through this jungle, do not be concerned, for there are no wild beasts in that region to harm you. In the middle of this jungle is a mountain. The magnificent hoard is scattered all over its slopes, coating the ground like a

blanket. There are thousands of different rare and exotic gems, diamonds, gold coins, and all of the riches you could ever want. During your return journey, you are more than welcome to visit my tower again so we might celebrate your good fortune together.”

The two descended the staircase with few words spoken. While walking alongside Mr. Knowledge, Brett thought about his strange and unsettling dream. His bare feet could feel the hard wooden steps that the man had rolled down. Such thoughts were unpleasant to ponder on, so Brett tried to instead focus his attention on the beautiful view visible through the windows they passed on their left.

At last, they reached the base of the stairs, and were once more in the kitchen. Although Brett had not noticed them earlier, there was indeed both a refrigerator and a microwave oven in the room. A creme-colored cloth bag sat on the kitchen table, and Mr. Knowledge picked it up and handed it to Brett. “I prepared this bag for you while you were napping. Inside you will find two loaves of bread and a leather flask, filled with water. It is a large bag, so you will also have plenty of room to carry gems and coins. There is a shoulder strap here, which will make it easy to travel with,” added Mr. Knowledge as he assisted Brett in slinging it over his shoulder. “I also put a cookie in the bag, so you might revel in your victory when you find the mountain. I buy cookies and other such things from your world—they raise my spirits. It is easy to become lonely and depressed when living alone, which is why I cherish visitors like you.”

Brett and Mr. Knowledge walked out the front door. The air outside was fresh and rejuvenating—far cleaner than the humid air in Michigan.

Mr. Knowledge pointed eastward. “Do you see the sun? Remember its position. Hike north until the sun goes down. Sleep until the sun has risen, then resume your journey until the sun is in this position again. At that point you shall turn east. Continue eastwards across the bridge and through the jungle. Once you are in the jungle, it will only take two hours to reach the slopes of the mountain.”

“Thank you,” responded Brett politely.

“And thank you, too!” declared the old man. “It was a pleasure to visit with you, and I shall look forward to seeing you again during your return journey.”

The front door of Mr. Knowledge’s tower faced westwards. Grassy meadows and hills were all that could be seen in every direction. “You traveled here from the south, and now you must depart into the north,” stated Mr. Knowledge, motioning northwards.

“Goodbye,” Brett called over his shoulder as he began to walk away.

“Farewell, my friend,” Mr. Knowledge returned.

Brett had only taken a few more steps when Mr. Knowledge came dashing up behind him. “I almost forgot my intention to give this to you,” he imparted, pulling an envelope from his pocket. “You must *not* open this until you have entered the jungle.”

Brett slid the envelope into his bag and then stared at Mr. Knowledge in a peculiar way. This man who claimed to know everything had just acknowledged his forgetfulness! Despite his confusion, however, Brett smiled and spoke, “Thank you for your advice. Goodbye!”

“I expect that you will attain your wealth very soon,” declared Mr. Knowledge. “Farewell.”

So Brett traveled on, and as the tower grew smaller and smaller in the distance, the grass reappeared and grew more and more alive. Hardly a cloud was in the sky, the wind was at his back, and the spirit of adventure was overflowing in his heart. Nevertheless, an uncomfortable feeling was also present within him. It was not his adventure-phobic side saying, “You fool! Go home!” Rather, it was a tiny voice deep down inside him that was warning, “There is something

wrong with that Unlimited F. Knowledge. Are you sure you can trust him?”

Brett looked backwards at the tower in the distance. It seemed as if a dark magic had killed the grass around it in a ring. Something unusual and sinister was lurking around the tower—he could feel it in his heart. Perhaps Mr. Knowledge was not the only resident?

Brett stood and thought for a while. Then, with a sigh, he dropped all his dark feelings and instead focused his attention on the horizon ahead. Beyond what he could see was a treasure beyond what he could imagine. Liveliness returned to his heart, and Brett continued his trek to the mountain that Mr. Knowledge had spoken of.

3

Brett Meets Misfortune

The hills ahead seemed endless, just as they were in Colorful Meadow and its vicinity. Upon reaching the top of a certain hill, Brett noticed that the wind had picked up to a great degree. After a pause, which he spent gazing at his surroundings and catching his breath, he continued across the top of the large hill.

All thoughts about his strange conversations with Mr. Knowledge had disappeared by this time, and the rolling hills and blue sky enthused his mind. At times when one is deeply relaxed and hopeful, it seems that something bothersome has to arrive and put a damper on the spirit. Such was the case with Brett, for as he was about to descend the steep hill, he hit his toe on a rock sticking out of the dirt. Not only did his toe hurt badly, but he also fell forward and rolled down the grassy slope until he reached the base.

Startled and angry, Brett sat in the long grass and nursed his toe. His bright attitude had been instantly dashed to pieces. Though he had whacked it hard, his toe was not bleeding and he was back on his feet within a short while. Immediately, he noticed that his bag sat on top of the hill behind him. Apparently he had dropped it during his tumble. Without delay, he clambered back up the hill.

Upon reaching the bag, Brett found that both loaves of bread, the water flask, and the cookie remained inside unharmed. However, the envelope was missing.

“Oh, no!” Brett grumbled. Anxiously, he searched around the hillside. When he was about to give up, he finally spotted the envelope sitting in the grass on the opposite hill. As he ran to grab it, a sudden gust caught the envelope and carried it over the hill, starting a long and ridiculous chase. The envelope sailed along with the wind, traveling at a terribly rapid speed. After a minute of hopeless pursuit, Brett observed that the envelope had settled in the grass once again. He was bending over to pick it up when the wind whisked it away like before. As if it were teasing Brett, the wind swirled the envelope back and forth, sometimes letting Brett brush it with his fingers but never letting him catch it. Then the envelope flew far over the hills and out of sight.

It did not take long for Brett to relocate it. The little envelope was dancing around in a nearby patch of yellow flowers. Brett lunged forward, but the envelope was too quick for him. It seemed that the envelope possessed a stubborn will of its own, refusing to be caught. Annoyance and fear were driving Brett mad. Suddenly, he brushed away his negative attitude and chose to view the mishap as an exciting game instead.

Brett had to expend much of his strength to simply keep up with the flying envelope. Nevertheless, he did not mind anymore, and was actually having fun. Indeed, the chase continued very much like a game. Occasionally, the envelope would pause, as if to let Brett catch up, and then it would dart away when he came near. Following multiple instances of this, the envelope glided at full speed across a huge, flat stretch of meadow. Brett ran across the field. Finally, he jumped toward it and grabbed the paper in mid-air.

Although out of breath and exhausted, he wore a smile on his face. “My, what outlandish adventures I have had!” he exclaimed. “Climbing into picture frames and chasing envelopes through meadows, oh my!” And then he laughed. These adventures were good ones, being merry

and enjoyable, and without crippling consequences if he failed. With longing in his eyes, Brett stared at the horizon ahead, itching to know what was beyond. Exploration was also a positive form of adventure, he decided. "Adventure is indeed a curious thing. And I think I like it!" Brett thought to himself. With these words, his adventure-phobic side died, and was no more.

Brett looked down at the plain white envelope in his hand. "I don't want to lose you again," he said. He was about to slide it back into his bag, but instead figured the envelope would be safer in his pocket. When shoving it into the pocket of his jeans, his hand felt something else inside.

"The gold triangle!" cried Brett, jerking the object out of his pocket. He had forgotten all about it. Contrary to his intentions, he had left it in his pocket when leaving Mr. Knowledge's tower. Now he was no longer an innocent young boy, but a thief! As a Christian, Brett could not have imagined himself stealing something that was not his, yet now he had done so!

Despite his initial feelings of terror, Brett became confident once more. A sincere apology to Mr. Knowledge would be necessary, and then the issue could be forgotten. Brett gazed back over the countless hills he had ventured through. The tower was merely a black speck on the horizon. As much as an entire hour would be required to travel there and back. A minute of thought yielded the resolution to resume his quest and return the triangle during the homeward trek.

Both the triangle and the envelope he kept in his pocket. Since he was still out of breath from his wild pursuit, Brett helped himself to some water from the flask which Mr. Knowledge had provided. The leather flask was very full and accounted for most of the weight in the bag. Apparently, the water in the flask had come from Mr. Knowledge's refrigerator, as it was much colder than Brett would have guessed.

He followed up his drink with some bread. The oval-shaped loaves in the bag appeared to be newly baked and were easy to rip apart. He gobbled down a sizable hunk of one of the loaves. Following his meal, it occurred to Brett that he had better use his resources more sparingly if he wanted them to last the span of his journey.

Over many more hills Brett climbed. The water and bread had rejuvenated him, so he was able to hike for a long time before he needed more. As he traveled, Brett observed that the hilly terrain around him was slowly morphing into a vast, flat, and wide meadow. Finally, he came to a place where the ground stretched out for miles in all directions like an infinite green carpet, without a tree or hill in sight. Above him was a cloudless blue expanse, bright and empty, except for the sun in the west. The sky slowly faded to a deeper blue as the hours progressed, and after many more it grew black. Thousands of stars peeped through the darkness, each a tiny yet magnificent jewel, spreading light over the grassy field. The bright moon, the king of all these jewels, inhabited the eastern sky. With the array of stars and the moon to provide light, Brett was able to see his surroundings with clarity.

As soon as the night arrived, Brett laid down to sleep. The air was warm, relieving the need for a blanket, although he wished for a pillow to raise his head. Besides the occasional howl of the wind, all noise in the meadow had been deadened. Not one cricket was chirping; not one owl was hooting. Brett passed the time by staring at the stars until he fell asleep.

Brett awoke in the middle of the night to a sudden pain in his left side. Immediately, he sat up and groaned. Two men stood over him, both with astonishment written on their faces.

"I cannot believe you kicked him," retorted the first man. "You could have gently shoved him awake instead."

The second man said nothing. Both of them watched Brett as he stood up and rubbed at

the sore spot on his side. The two men were extremely short, the first one a bit higher than Brett's chin, and the second one about the same height as Brett. Appearing to be in his mid twenties, the first man wore thick, dark brown pants which were covered with fades, holes and wear marks. His plain white shirt was tucked under his woven belt and the bangs of his bushy brown hair hung in front of his forehead like tassels on a hat. Taller and older than his companion, the second man wore gray pants and a dull red shirt. Two black belts crisscrossed his chest. Both men wore long black boots and swords hung from their belts. By their garb it could be guessed that the men had come from a primitive, medieval civilization; however, there was one fact about them that was peculiar. Strapped over top of their bulky backpacks were modern-looking oxygen tanks, awkward and cumbersome to carry, and of the sort that are used by mountain climbers when the air is difficult to breathe.

"Who are you?" Brett queried. "And why did you kick me?" he added, turning to the second man.

"I am Kirzak, a Master of Talnum, and with me is my partner Matilock," the second man replied. "I am sorry I kicked you—I was just having some fun. Now please explain to us what you are doing here. This is the last place I would expect to find a person, much less a young boy such as you. Do you live in this area?"

"No, I do not live here," answered Brett. "I received directions from a person named Mr. Knowledge that will lead me to a certain mountain."

"Then we share something in common, for we also are searching for a mountain," Kirzak declared.

"Yes," Matilock seconded, "we are looking for a mountain with a flat peak, known as Hope Mountain. There we will find a secret staircase. We have journeyed a long way from the lands in the far south to find it."

"Perhaps the three of us should travel together, if we are headed for the same mountain," suggested Kirzak. "And who is this Knowledge-person you speak of?"

"His name is Mr. Unlimited Knowledge. Surely you passed by his tower if you have come here from the south. The tower is only a few hours away," Brett informed.

Kirzak scowled. "We did pass by a tower, but it was in pieces—a giant pile of rubble, although I could tell that it was the remnants of a tall structure. We found these lying among the debris." Kirzak presented several jagged pieces of red stone from his pocket.

Brett gasped. These were the broken pieces of the red gem in Mr. Knowledge's desk drawer! "So Mr. Knowledge's tower has been destroyed? This is horrible!" he shouted.

"We inspected the ruins quite thoroughly," Matilock noted, "and we did not see any dead bodies. Your Knowledge-friend might still be alive. If he is not, then I am sincerely sorry."

For a long time, nobody spoke a word. Brett felt like crying, but no tears came. How Mr. Knowledge's home had been obliterated in such a short time was beyond his imagination. "Mr. Knowledge said this was a land of Good Fortune. It seems unlikely that such an unfortunate thing would happen to him if he lived in such a tame land," Brett remarked when some time had passed.

"A tame land?" Kirzak began to chuckle, and then exchanged glances with Matilock. "You call this place a *tame* land? Young boy, we have traveled through these lands for over two weeks, and seen many strange and wild things. This place is anything but tame. No person should travel through these parts without a sword for defense." Kirzak tapped the hilt of his sword as he said this.

"If it is as dangerous as you say, I am not sure if I should continue to the mountain," Brett

admitted.

“If your heart is set on going there, we will accompany you,” declared Matilock. “Though I recommend you return to your home instead. There is rumor of monsters that guard the secret stairs. Hope Mountain is not a good place for you.”

“Mr. Knowledge claimed the mountain was perfectly safe!” Brett objected.

“Well, I do not know who this Knowledge-person is, but there must be something wrong with him,” Kirzak warned. “He is either a liar or he does not know what he is talking about. This is the wilderness, and wildernesses are, well, wild. These are strange lands, which hold strange people, creatures, and places. Our incentive to journey through such peculiar lands is to find the flat peak, as we have said. I have dreamt of going there since I was young. The mountain has not been visited in thousands of years, but we know that it lies someplace north of our home in Talnum.”

“How do you know these things about the mountain if it has not been seen in so long?” asked Brett.

“There is a song written during the ancient times which describes the mountain. It is the only existing source of information concerning it,” stated Matilock.

“Yes, the song has fascinated me since I was a boy,” Kirzak added. “I have the song memorized by heart.”

Matilock smiled. “I enjoy listening to songs of old. I have heard this one already, but I should like to hear it again. Sing it for us, Kirzak, please do!”

“I would like to listen as well,” agreed Brett.

“If the two of you insist, I will sing.” Kirzak drew a deep breath and began:

Not far south of where the Northern Sea lies,
The secret stairs to infinity rise.
Unseen by mortals without special aid,
It was by the Lord erected and made.

Down from high Heaven the staircase descends.
Infinity spans between its two ends.
Up on top of Hope Mountain’s flattened peak,
These invisible stairs three men did seek.

One of the three, carrying Eslidok,
Slid the sword into a hole in the rock.
This was a keyhole and the sword was key,
And then the stairs gained visibility.

The staircase before them and in their sight,
They openly laughed at the daunting height.
Said they, “Climb to Heaven we surely can,
And in doing so, prove the strength of man.”

The first man quickly clambered up the stairs,
With confidence, no worries and no cares,
Until a monster appeared in his path,

And knocked him right off the staircase in wrath.

The second man carried with him a sword,
So a battle ensued: the beast was gored.
But thick was the fog; all things it did hide,
Thus the blinded man fell, and then he died.

The third man carried a lantern in hand;
Therefore meeting the challenge's demand.
But as he continued, the air grew thin;
He fell a victim to suffocation.

The three men perished during their attempt,
To reach the Heaven of which they had dreamt.
The mountain of Hope still exists today,
And there is found the unconquered stairway.

Upon conclusion of the song, Kirzak crossed his arms and smiled. "It is a short one, but interesting, is it not?"

Brett's mouth hung open. "I thought it was a terrible song! Is that how it really ends, with the last man suffocating to death?"

"Well, yes, but that is not the point," Kirzak defended. "The point is that the stairway remains unconquered. And Matilock and I will be the first to conquer it!" Kirzak pointed to the oxygen tank on his back. "With these, the two of us will be able to breathe, even where the air is thin. We also are carrying swords with us, in case we must kill any monsters on the staircase. There are lanterns in our backpacks, as well."

"I see," Brett murmured. "But I believe you are overlooking one detail. The lyrics implied that the stairs are infinite. If they are infinite, no amount of time will be enough for you to reach the top!"

Kirzak laughed. "That is indeed what the song says, however, I believe that the words are figurative. When the lyrics refer to 'the infinite height', they are simply stating that the staircase is incredibly tall." He paused. "It cannot possibly be *infinite*, or the staircase would ascend into space and get in the way of stars and other celestial bodies!"

"The song also claimed that Heaven itself is at the top of the stairs. But Heaven is not up in the sky." Brett pointed at the stars above him as he said this. "Heaven is completely separated from the universe isn't it? So it is not possible for a staircase to take you there."

"That is what I thought for a long time," Matilock agreed. "But during our journey we met someone who explained it to us. Heaven and the physical universe are separate realms, suspended alongside each other in four-dimensional space, he said. The secret staircase ascends upwards through the sky for a great distance, but at some point, the staircase bends in a four-dimensional direction, causing the stairs to exit the realm of time and enter the empty expanse of four-dimensional space. The staircase continues through empty space until it enters the four-dimensional realm of Heaven."

After a moment of silence, Kirzak unfastened the scabbard of his sword from his belt. Holding it up in the white moonlight, he caressed the smooth contours of the sheath. "This is Eslidok, the Sword of Kings, the oldest, yet sharpest sword to be made for mortal use. This is the

very sword that is referred to in the song that you heard.” He handed it to Brett.

Brett stared down at the sword in his hands. The crossguard of the hilt was perfectly flat on the blade-pointing side, except near the tips where it curved backward away from the blade. Elaborately designed, the grip section of the hilt was made mostly of the same silvery metal as the rest of the sword, but was also complimented by a thin band of a darker and less reflective metal, which spiraled around the hilt. At the tip of the hilt was a knob-like pommel to prevent hand slips. The scabbard was smooth but plain, made from a black, lusterless metal. The sword was altogether wondrously lightweight and could easily be wielded with one hand or two.

Carefully, Brett drew the sword from its sheath. The blade itself had crisp edges and a shallow groove running down most of its length. As a whole, the sword was both plain and beautiful, and it shone magnificently in the moonlight.

At that moment, as Brett stood admiring the blue reflections in the blade, he realized that the sword, the two men, and the entire night sky around him were rapidly fading away. Brett found himself looking up at a cheery morning sky instead, and he was lying on his back in the grass.

Brett leapt to his feet. Neither Matilock nor Kirzak could be seen, and Eslidok had also vanished. At the time of his conversation with the two men, everything had seemed real, but now Brett knew for sure it had been no more than a strange dream.

Such a complicated dream demanded time for thought and reconciliation. Foremost in his mind was the troubling idea that Mr. Knowledge’s tower had been reduced to ruins. If this was true, then he had best be turning back to question and assist the homeless man. But a five-story tower inhabited by an omniscient and fearless wonder could not possibly be dashed to pieces in such a short period of time, unless by a tornado—an unlikely guess, considering the cloudless and sunny weather in the Land of Good Fortune. “It was just a dream. Mr. Knowledge and his tower are perfectly fine,” he consoled himself. To turn back merely because of a bizarre dream would be ridiculous.

Kirzak had also claimed that this land was dangerous, whereas Mr. Knowledge had claimed otherwise. After he had thought it over, Brett resolved to resume his adventure, but with added caution.

As he hiked, his mind lingered over the words of the two men. Perhaps there really was an invisible staircase at the treasure mountain, though he figured this was unlikely. Another nonsensical assertion from Kirzak was that the mountain had not been seen in two thousand years. What conflicted this notion was Mr. Knowledge’s mentioning of his own visit to the mountain. If both Kirzak and Mr. Knowledge were correct, then Mr. Knowledge was over two thousand years old! Despite how real the dream had felt, Brett chose to disregard all of its suggestions. The mountain did not house an infinite stairway and Mr. Knowledge was certainly not two millennia in age.

The air was fresh and cool around him, but as the hours slowly passed by, the delight of morning transformed into the heat and exhaustion of the afternoon. Tired feet tread over stiff grass for many hours with nothing exciting or unusual along the way.

High in the eastern sky, the sun could be seen hanging like a golden lamp. It was in the same position now as it had been during his departure from the tower the day before. “When the sun is in this position, you shall turn east,” Mr. Knowledge had told him. Thus, Brett continued his journey with the sun ahead of him.

By this point, his bag had grown lighter, as his first loaf of bread had almost disappeared entirely and his water flask was running low. Although Brett figured his bread would last until

the end of his adventure, his flask clearly needed to be refilled as soon as possible.

Following an hour more of travel, Brett heard the faint sound of rushing water ahead of him. Presently, the noise grew louder and its source could be seen as a wide foamy ribbon in the distance. It did not take him long to reach the sheer banks of the river, a massive and turbulent monster comprised of glistening shades of blue and splashes of solid white.

Lining the opposite shore of the river was a wall of green trees, resembling palm trees with green trunks and frayed tufts at their tops. Little of their detail could be observed from Brett's location, for the river that separated him from the jungle was about two miles wide.

Upon arrival at the riverbank, his initial thought was to refill his leather flask. To his dismay, the bank of the river was impossible to descend due to its steepness—unless he wanted to plunge headfirst into the wildly writhing water.

When Brett had finally convinced himself that the water was inaccessible, he instead started to scan the riverbank for the bridge of which Mr. Knowledge had mentioned. The structure was impossible to miss due to its obvious size. Parallel with and near to the northern horizon, the bridge appeared like a thin, long rope, stretched tight between the opposing banks.

Twenty minutes of hiking northwards along the river were necessary to reach the bridge. As Brett approached this feat of construction, he observed that it was supported by huge wooden pillars that extended down to tiny islands of piled stone which rose out of the water. There were two of these piers descending to each island, and each pair was thirty feet apart. Despite its two-mile length, the bridge was only as wide as the Parkenders' small kitchen table. Made from a yellowish wood, the structure resembled a boardwalk, although it had no side railing or even a parapet to prevent a tumble into the violent, frothy water. Brett could easily guess that the bridge had been built by primitive means.

The cool and smooth wood felt delightful to his feet, and erased his fear of stepping on sharp stones in the grass. However, this new walking surface was treacherously slippery. Down beneath him, the powerful current consistently splashed up against the supporting beams, sending arms of spray ten feet into the air and coating the walkway with puddles. The extreme narrowness of the bridge added to his discomfort.

Caution was required and exercised. Brett began at a slow walk, worrying that a sudden slip would befall him. If he did fall into the unwelcoming river, he would surely be swept away, without strength to resist the current and swim to the shore. Even if the water below was stagnant, Brett would probably drown, for he could not swim long distances.

So vast was this river that Brett felt like he was hovering over the ocean itself. He imagined that the waves beneath him were those of the mighty Atlantic, and he stood in the center of a transcontinental bridge, miles away from dry land. Quickly, his previous caution melted away and his mind was too busy to notice.

At a certain place on the bridge where it was particularly wet, Brett slipped. He fell on his stomach, spun ninety degrees, and slid off the edge of the bridge, grasping desperately at the wood as he descended. His fingers finally caught a hold of the edge of the walkway, and he found himself dangling in air, frozen with shock.

For several long seconds, Brett hung there by his fingers, with the underside of the bridge above him and the rushing blue water beneath him. The wood he clutched was sending splinters into his fingers. Splashes of spray leapt up from the river and licked his toes. A surge of anxiety flooded into him. When his fingers became tired, he would certainly plummet into the raging water.

It took all the strength his arms could afford to hoist himself up. He threw one of his

knees onto the walkway and used it as an anchor to swing his body up the rest of the way. A second slip occurred as he crawled back onto the bridge, but he immediately stopped himself with his arm. When he stood up once again, he did so slowly and carefully, and then sighed with joyous relief. The fear of falling evaporated, and was replaced by a strange feeling of comfort. Having escaped a close brush with death, he now felt braver than he ever had in his life. He even managed to smile, though his body was weak and shaken.

“Adventure cannot do me in. I am not afraid of anything!” Brett cried. However, a faint hint of doubt lay behind his words.

After a long while had passed, Brett could easily observe the extremely vast and dark jungle ahead. Unlike the sheer bank on the western side of the river, the bank on the eastern side was smooth and sloped down into the water gradually. Not far back from the rocky bank stood massive green pillars, clustered together in the form of a great jungle. These towering trees lacked branches on their bending green trunks, although their tips were divided into multiple parts which reminded Brett of palm leaves.

Besides a few minor slips, the latter half of the journey across the bridge was uneventful. Brett chose his steps with care until he reached the point where the bridge met up with the opposite bank.

Unlike the grass-covered terrain on the west side of the river, this bank was coated in gravel through which no grass grew. Though the stone beneath his feet was sharp and painful, he took little notice. A sense of accomplishment came over him upon stepping off the bridge. He had spent a full hour journeying over the enormous structure.

Directly in front of him loomed the border of the great jungle. Its dismal and forbidding appearance made Brett reluctant to continue, but as he entered through the first row of trees, he reminded himself that Mr. Knowledge had deemed the place completely safe. Kirzak, on the other hand, had declared the land to be wild and dangerous, however, being only a character of Brett’s dreams, Kirzak was clearly a less reliable source of information than Mr. Knowledge. Disregarding Kirzak’s warnings, Brett forgot his fears and bravely hiked onward between the huge green pillars.

So thick were these trees clustered together that the bright sunlight above could only pass through the canopy in certain places. In many regions of the jungle, it was as dark as if it were nighttime.

Already the gravel beneath his feet had disappeared and was replaced by smooth, bare, hard-packed dirt. This was perhaps more comfortable and safe to walk on than any other surface he had trodden over so far. The fact that the ground here was bare immediately struck him as odd. He had always been certain that jungles were teeming with plant and animal life, so the absence of grass, shrubs, vines, animals, and even birds was shocking. All that could be seen were the strange and fantastic trees, all very close together.

Brett approached one of these bizarre pillars and stroked its trunk. The bark of the tree, if it could rightfully be called bark, felt rough and leathery. As he progressed past each tree, Brett pondered much on his curious surroundings.

After twenty minutes had passed, he spotted something that lay at the foot of one of the trees. He could not tell what it was until he was almost close enough to pick it up.

It was a flashlight—a real, genuine, red flashlight. An uninhabited jungle in a world with no modern technology, except at Mr. Knowledge’s tower, was the last place Brett would have expected to find an abandoned flashlight. It appeared to be in good condition, and he even found that it lit up when he switched it on, thus, he figured it must have been dropped fairly recently.

Though he could have traveled through this dark place without a flashlight, the light he now had was useful and brought him comfort. As he continued his walk, he waved the flashlight back and forth, extinguishing the shadows before him. While he hiked, his mind was busy with thoughts concerning his find, and when a minute had passed, he finally concluded that the flashlight must have been left behind by a visitor from Earth.

Presently, Brett paused for a drink of water from his flask. His mind began to wander to the afternoon before when Mr. Knowledge had given this flask and the bread to him. Suddenly, memory of the envelope slipped into his thoughts. Mr. Knowledge had clearly told him not to open it until he entered the jungle. He was within the jungle now, so Brett fished the envelope from his pocket.

Crinkled and worn, the envelope had traveled a long way, and Brett was thankful that he had not lost it during his wild chase through the meadow. The envelope itself bore no markings or writing on it at all. Carefully, Brett ripped the top open and slid out a folded piece of paper. Upon unfolding it, he found that the letter was written in a handwriting much messier than what he would have expected from a man as fluent as Mr. Knowledge. What Brett read caused his heart to pound madly:

Brett Parkender,

You have been lied to.

Forget everything I ever told you. They were all lies. I am not really the all-knowing miracle worker I made myself out to be. (I do not believe in miracles anyway.) I do not have unlimited knowledge—but my Master does. Yes, my Master tells me everything. It was Master who informed me that you would arrive. Master tells me everything I need to know, and then I parrot it to you.

My dragon slaying tales, the Day of Knowledge, and even the treasure mountain are fictitious. In the center of this jungle lies no treasure, but instead a trap. Get out of here while you still can! A great Evil lives in this jungle.

You ask why I sent you here against my will. The reason is because I have no will. My Master exercises complete control over me. When Master says to me, “Do this,” I do it. When Master says to me, “Kill this person,” I must. I have lost my power to refuse. The morning of the day of your arrival, Master said to me, “See to it that this boy enters the jungle.” Thus, I had no choice but to send you there. I am merely a tool being used in a contrivance to kill you. I have given you this letter so that you might escape before it is too late. When next I speak with my Master, I will be in great trouble for doing this, however, Master never said, “See to it that this boy is killed in the jungle,” but rather that I make sure you enter it. By sending you with this letter, I have satisfied my Master’s command, yet may be saving your life. I have sent many to their deaths in this jungle, but I have special reasons to spare you.

If you get out safely, please do not return to my tower. I do not think I could bear to see your face after what I’ve done to you. Also, Master will probably order me to kill you with my knife, and then I can do nothing to stop myself.

Now that you have entered the jungle as my Master insisted, please make haste and go home. It would be dreadful if you perish there. I do hope you view me not with scorn, but instead as a pitiful, mistreated creature, for that is what I am.

Not Yours Truly,
Unlimited Knowledge

P. S. Some things in this dark and dangerous world (which is not really the Land of Good Fortune) grow to unusual sizes.

No sooner had Brett reached the letter's end, when he shoved both it and the envelope into his bag and fearfully set forth in the direction he had come from. His adventure-phobic side had been resurrected!

Never in all his life had Brett felt as frightened as he was now. He walked through the jungle with fretful thoughts and anxious speed. His heart felt like a resonating drum that grew louder as he traveled.

Suddenly, a thought passed into his mind that was so startling that Brett paused in his tracks. For a moment he deliberated over Mr. Knowledge's postscript, then he stared at the huge green pillars surrounding him. It took only a short while for Brett to arrive at the terrifying conclusion that what he had originally assumed were trees was actually grass!

An image from one of his favorite fantasy stories of a gigantic creature with many legs appeared in his head, and with a gasp, Brett leapt into a sprint and did not dare lessen his speed. Time was of the essence, and all Brett could think about was the relief he would gain when he safely reached the bridge.

But before he had ran far, a great shadow crept in front of him. He knew with no doubt that the shadow belonged to an evil, monstrous thing. Something was following him.

[End of Sample]

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