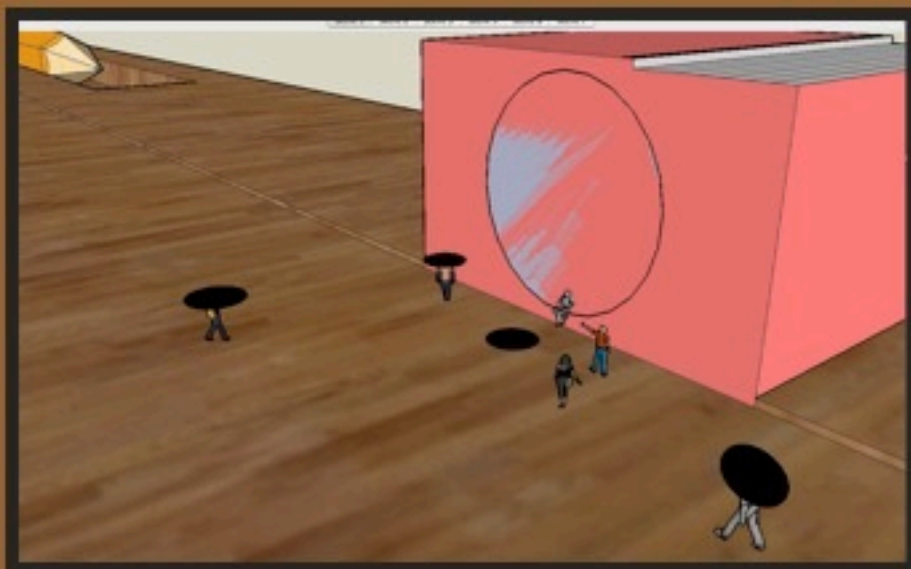
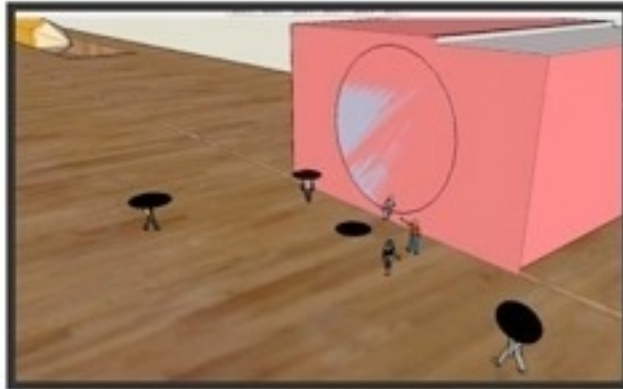




THE PIXELS

JOURNEY TO THE BOTTOM
OF THE DESK

BY DOUGLAS EVANS



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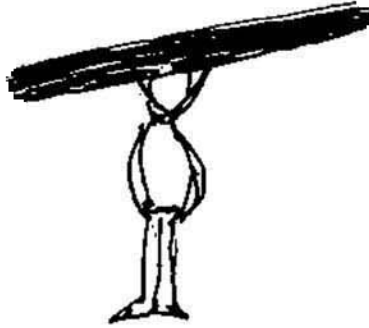
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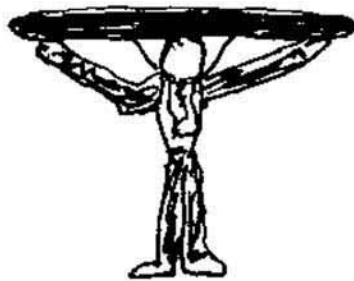
The Pixels



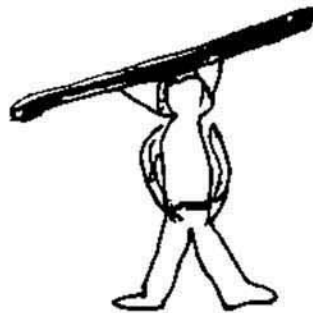
Nano Pixel



Bitty Pixel



Grandpa Grain Pixel



Mrs. Dotty Pixel



Mr. Speck Pixel

Royal Palace
Upper Poyntz Colony

P To Speck Pixel, Leader
Pixel Corps of Discovery Scientific Expedition

You and your family are to fly from Upper Poyntz Colony and search for the source of the excess carbon dioxide in our atmosphere. As you know, Dr. Pixel, this CO₂ overload has caused severe climate change and warming of our air during the past decade. Due to the temperature increase, our growing season is shorter, our wildlife habitat is reduced, and the water table is lowering at an alarming rate. Though our scientists are certain that carbon dioxide has caused the climate crisis, what's emitting this greenhouse gas has yet to be discovered. We are depending on your corps to find the answer.

Dr. Pixel, time is running out for our colony. Your mission will also include exploring the region beyond Upper Poyntz for a distance of not more than one hundred meters. You will search for a suitable site for our colony to relocate in the event that this is necessary.

Best Regards,
Queen Iota and the Scientist Senate

Chapter One

In which we meet Faith and learn about Fulton



How small the stormy sea makes me feel.”

Faith Singer slugged the deflated yellow ball and watched it orbit the lopsided pole. Her frizzy hair was tucked under a red stocking hat, and she wore wool mittens against the February cold. Through the thick lenses of her eyeglasses, she looked across the school playground and beyond the coastal road that ran alongside it. Her poor eyesight allowed her only a tunnel view of the ocean beach in the distance. She could make out the driftwood-cluttered sand, the white line of breaking waves, and the lighthouse on the point. The rest of the scene, the outer rim of her vision, was fuzzy.

“A rough ocean means we’re soon in for some rainy day recesses,” Faith told herself. “Quiet games and silent reading.”

She pushed back her glasses and waited for the tetherball to unwind from the crooked pole. After punching the ball again, she turned toward the school building. Only last spring, the western wall had been painted bright purple. Since then, blasts of salty

wind had turned it to a sheet of curly purple peelings.

Near the wall, Fulton Benson, a classmate, was dribbling a basketball. For his height and large heft, the boy moved surprising swiftly. His stringy black hair swished side to side as he darted one way then another.

Faith knew that Fulton lived with his grandfather, Ethan Benson, on the Pomo Indian Rancheria. Mr. Benson was a storyteller who often visited Point Arena Elementary School to tell ancient Pomo myths about this area of Northern California.

Faith hit the ball again. She smiled thinking about her favorite tale that Ethan Benson told her class. It involved tiny people no bigger than grains of sand who lived in a ring of six colonies near Point Area. These sand people were far advanced in science, technology, and medicine, and taught the Pomo people many skills. Thanks to the sand people the Indians learn to build fires, make elaborate fish traps, and weave beautiful baskets.

Faith liked the idea that a mini-doctor would enter a Pomo's body to fight a flu bug or roam through his hair in search of lice. In exchange, the Indians offered the sand people transportation across fields or to the beach on the top of their bare feet.

"Imagine, human beings no bigger than the dot above an i in my reading book," she said aloud. "And despite the size difference, big and teeny, the two groups helped each other and never fought."

The school bell rang. Faith held her gaze on Fulton until he charged toward the school door and entered the blurriness.

"But in science class, Dr. Carbo told us that Pomo myths were just a way for the natives to explain the unexplainable," she said,

“until scientists found an explanation.”

Then she sent the tetherball spinning a final time and ran toward the door herself.

Chapter Two

In which we meet the Pixels, and Nano must hide



“Run, Nano! Nine centimeters to go!”

Speck Pixel, leader of the Pixel Corps of Discovery, stood before the cone-shaped cavern cut deep into the pink, shoebox-shaped hill.

Again he shouted into the walkie-talkie. “Move, Nano. Keep your mind on what you’re doing. Run! Run!”

Dr. Dot Pixel, kneeling beside her husband, checked her watch. A strong, slender woman, she wore a red fanny pack around her waist and a tense expression on her face. “The Noise will start any second now,” she said. “I’m going out to help him. He’ll never get back in time.”

“Not without your roundhat on, Dotty,” Speck said. “Nano will be all right. He knows what do to.”

Nine centimeters to the southwest, Nano Pixel, age eight, kept his eyes fixed on the pink formation on the horizon. As he ran, his black roundhat flew off his head, exposing the bad haircut his

mother had given him last night. With the leather strap pulling at his neck, the wide black disc flapped behind him like a kite. The drag was too much, and Nano fell upon the slick brown surface. He landed hard on his side, tearing his jeans and nearly smashing the chunk of chocolate cake tied to his back.

In the meantime, from the top of the flat pink hill, ten-year old Bitty Pixel watched her brother through binoculars. A westerly wind swept her white-blond hair off her face.

“Nano slipped!” she shouted. “He fell over!” She swung the binoculars to the left. “Dad! Tell Nano to run south one centimeter. The land turns white! Maybe there’s more traction!”

“Get up, Nano!” Dot said. “Hurry!” She drew two rubber plugs from the pocket of her canvas coat. “Earplugs, everyone!”

Speck called into his walkie-talkie. “Nano! Bitty says to head south. Make sure your earplugs are in snug and your tracking beacon is on. When the Shadow appears, you must wear your roundhat. Don’t do anything foolish. Remain motionless at all times.”

The walkie-talkie crackled, and Speck heard a reply. “I know, Dad. I know.”

Speck inserted a rubber plug into each ear and said to his wife, “We must get inside, Dotty. Nano will be OK. He has his roundhat and suction cups.” He checked to see that Bitty was climbing down from the top of the pink hill. “Come on, Dot, I’ll give you a boost.”

Fingers linked, Speck hoisted his wife onto the ledge two millimeters above them. She crawled onto the floor of the colossal

conical cave. Hardly had Speck climbed up himself, when a low rumble, like distant thunder, came from the northeast. Second by second the sound grew louder until the entire pink cavern shook.

Speck, Dot, and Bitty huddled inside the cave entrance. Even in the shelter, they knew better than to remove the earplugs that Grandpa Grain had carved from the rubber boulders found in the area. Until it softened, the ear-blasting Noise made communication with Nano impossible.

Dot leaned toward Speck's ear. A family doctor in Upper Poyntz Colony, she was not only the expedition's medic but also the cook and quartermaster. "We needed food and air samples, but it was a mistake to allow Nano to go out there," she shouted. "He's never been beyond the Bottomless Crack. We should have sent Bitty."

"I would have gone and been back by now," said Bitty, who held her binoculars on the white area.

"Nano is well-trained," said Speck. "If we are in the Land of Megas as Grandpa Grain suspects, any gog out there will see him only as a tiny black spot."

"If he's wearing his roundhat," said Bitty.

"And if he can stay still for once," said Dot.

Speck wrapped his arms around his wife and daughter. "Yes, Nano can be reckless," he said.

"Like when he stumbled into Long Canyon and slid to the bottom," said Dot.

"Or when he stepped in the puddle of sticky white stuff and we had to cut off the bottom of his hiking boot to free him," said Bitty.

“Nano will be all right,” said Speck. “He knows what to do.”

Meanwhile, far to the southwest, Nano had climbed to his feet. He adjusted the load on his back and pushed his earplugs more firmly in place. A long stretch of the flat, slick surface still separated him from the pink box.

“The Shadow will come soon,” he told himself. “I bet I can reach the white region that Bitty spotted before it does.”

Nano checked his GPS unit, a hand-held device that told his bearings and speed, and began running southward. Less than a centimeter away, the ground rose. Here the surface was rough and so bright white that Nano put on his sun goggles to guard against the glare.

“What is this white ground?” he said aloud. “It’s soft and rough, but not cold like snow.”

With the giant cake crumb bumping against his back, Nano turned east again. Here his hiking boots gave him a better grip, and he made good time. How great it felt to be running out in the open. A cool breeze blew, and the sky remained clear. The raucous Noise, vibrating the white surface, tickled his feet.

“Yip! Yip! Yippee!” the boy cried, waving his arms. “I’m King of the Earth! I’m Big Man of the World!”

After two centimeters, however, Nano stopped. What had he just run across? He looked backward and saw it. Stretching from horizon to horizon was a straight blue line. A road? A wide trail perhaps?

“But why so straight?” he said, peering down the blue path. “I gotta find out where it goes.”

After a glance toward the pink hill, Nano started up the blue trail. Soon he came to a second path, this one metallic gray, and curving northward. A short hike up this trail brought him to the intersection of still another trail, this one also short and gray.

He stooped and swiped his hand over the shiny surface. His fingers came away dark. "Graphite," he said. "The same material as pencil lead."

As he spoke, a blast of wind nearly knocked him over. At the same time, a dark blurry shape filled the southern sky. The Shadow had arrived.

Staying low, the boy put on his black roundhat. It covered him and the cake crumb completely. Next, he reached into the pouch of his hooded sweatshirt and pulled out two rubber suction cups, not unlike ones found at the end of sink plungers. Holding a cup in each hand, he sprinted to the end of the northern gray path. Here he sat down and pounded the plungers against the white ground.

"The Shadow usually remains for about an hour," he said. "I have plenty of food and drink, and in the event of a landslant I'm prepared. Time to relax."

Nano reached around and tore off a large piece of chocolate cake. He took several bites, before opening his water bottle. During this recent trek, he had discovered a large pond filled with a sweet, lemony liquid. After pouring out his water, he had filled the bottle with the flavorful stuff.

"Best lemonade I've ever drank," he said. "Won't Mom and Dad be pleased with the pink lake that I found?"

As he gulped, Nano peered from under the roundhat. In the southern sky, the massive silhouette moved side to side. It switched from gray to black and back to gray.

The boy dropped onto his stomach. "A shifting Shadow often means a landslant is coming," he told himself. "This could be fun."

He reached for the suction cups. But in the process, he kicked over his water bottle. The round container rolled from under the roundhat, down the gray trail, and across the blue one.

"Whoops!" he said. "Mom and Dad said to never move with a Shadow present." He looked toward the bottle. "But I sure would like another drink."

In the southern sky, the fuzzy black form darkened again.

Nano argued with himself. "But my parents are always warning me about things that need no warning. They're scientists, so they worry too much. They only let Bitty do the fun stuff like climb on top of the pink hill." He saw the Shadow increase in size. "Mom and Dad must believe Grandpa Grain's theory about where we landed. But, I mean, come on. How could that Shadow possibly be a gog, a mega person over a thousand times my size? Grandpa says the megas are too big for us to see clearly. He thinks everything in the Land of Megas is too enormous to see."

The southern silhouette grew darker still.

"No, that black shape is only a rain cloud," Nano went on. "And hiding under this silly roundhat is a waste of time. So you know what? I think I'll go fetch my bottle."

Chapter Three

In which Faith returns from recess



Faith Singer sat at her desk by the window.

She grabbed a yellow pencil from the groove at the top of the desk.

“Now where was I?” she said.

In the middle of her desktop lay a sheet of blue-lined notebook paper. Before recess, Faith had started writing a story. So far, her messy cursive handwriting filled half the page.

“One day a beautiful fourth-grade girl wanted to find where the universe ended,” she read aloud. “So she built a spaceship that could travel at the speed of light.”

At this point, something on the paper caught Faith’s eye. She adjusted her eyeglasses and leaned forward for a closer look.

“Peculiar,” she said. “There’s a dot above the t in light. I must have dotted my t by mistake.”

She flipped her pencil around and lowered the eraser end toward the extra dot. She was about to rub it away when she noticed her pencil tip.

“My point’s not pointy enough,” she said.

Faith eyed the pink plastic pencil sharpener on the upper right hand corner of her desktop. But she didn’t pick it up. Instead, she raised her hand and called out, “Mrs. Alexander, may I sharpen my pencil?”

Mrs. Alexander, the straight-backed fourth-grade teacher who wore a white pantsuit and a white silk scarf around her neck, looked up from her desk. “Make it snappy, Faith,” she said. “You have a story to finish.”

Faith started to stand, but before she had moved an inch, something stuck her back. She spun around and scowled at Fulton Benson, who sat behind her.

“What do you want?” she said.

The large boy grinned, showing teeth flecked with chocolate, remains of the birthday cupcake he had washed down with lemonade before recess. Strands of black hair dangled over his broad face.

“I want to know, Faithy, why you always play tetherball by yourself on the playground,” he said. “You bat that old tetherball, and watch it go around and around. That’s all you do. Stare at the ocean and spin the tetherball.”

Faith frowned. She wanted to mention that Fulton also played alone, but instead she said, “I play solo so I’ll always win.”

“*Pah!*” went Fulton. This sent brown spots of spit onto his blank writing paper. “And I also want to know why you don’t ever use that pink pencil sharpener you keep on your desktop?”

“Because the sharpener is new, and I don’t want to mess it up

with pencil shavings and lead bits.”

“*Pah!* It’s a pencil sharpener, Faithy, not an ornament.”

“Why don’t you mind your own business?” said Faith.

“Frankly, Faithy, you are my business,” said Fulton. “Not only does your pencil sharpening bug me, but so does the way you constantly talk to yourself.”

Faith looked straight at the boy. Through the thick lenses, her black eyes appeared owlish, large and round. “That way no one argues with me,” she said.

Fulton lowered his gaze. “Just stop being annoying.”

Faith faced her desktop again. She glanced toward the pink sharpener and rechecked her pencil tip. “Maybe I have a pointier pencil in my desk,” she said.

She returned her blunt pencil to the pencil groove. With both hands, she gripped the edge of her desktop. But again, the writing paper drew her attention and she leaned forward.

“Very peculiar,” she said. “The dot above my t has moved. It’s now under the l. How can a dot move?”

She blew on her paper. Eraser crumbs flew to the top of her desk, but the dot remained. “Very, very peculiar.”

“Get busy, Faith,” Mrs. Alexander called out.

“And stop talking to yourself,” Fulton said behind her.

Chapter Four

In which we learn more about the Circle and watch a landslant



Speck, Dot, and Bitty Pixel stood in the mouth of the pink cavern. They looked down upon the Bottomless Crack a short distance to the south. Over three millimeters across and unknown centimeters deep, this mysterious crevice divided the strange new world. To the north of the crack stood the pink hill and a few centimeters west of that lay Long Canyon, twenty centimeters long and over one centimeter deep. South of the crack, the flat brown land stretched on forever, broken only by the occasional appearance of the white field, upon which Nano now huddled under his roundhat.

The Noise had faded enough to allow the three Pixels to talk among themselves.

“I’m guessing it’s a sheet of ice, a glacier with patches of dirt upon it,” said Speck, pointing toward the white region. “That explains why it comes and goes. The ice is melting and freezing.”

Dot called into a walkie-talkie, her expression tense. “Nano, do you read me? Come in, Nano.” She heard only static. “Careless, boy. Why is his walkie-talkie turned off?”

Bitty peered through the binoculars. She studied the dark marks on the white area. “If Nano managed to get there, I can’t tell what spot is him,” she said.

“That’s why Grandpa Grain made us the roundhats,” said Speck. He checked his GPS unit. “At least Nano’s tracking beacon is working. There’s his yellow blip.”

Bitty swung her binoculars toward the southern sky. The Shadow swayed east to west. It turned shades of black and gray.

“I still can’t believe Grandpa’s theory about where our plane crashed,” she said. “The Land of Megas? Like in the old folk tales? Hard to believe. Teachers at Upper Poyntz Elementary School told us the tales about the humongous humans called gogs or megas. We learned about the Circle and the six colonies that were named after the six points of the native mega’s world--North, South, East, West, and Lower Poyntz Colonies. And ours, Kali, Upper Poyntz Colony.

Speck, a physicist in Upper Poyntz Colony, nodded. “Each colony in the Circle specialized in a field of science,” he said. “West Poyntz colonists were expert biologists and East Poyntz excelled in mathematics, technology, and atmospheric science. From South Poyntz came the philosophers and North Poyntz produced architects and engineers. Lower Poyntz colonists studied military science, while our colony devotes itself to the natural sciences—physics, astronomy, geology, and chemistry.”

“But how can those gog tales be true?” said Bitty. “No one in the colony ever believed them... no one except Uncle Dab.”

“Your grandpa has read his brother’s journal many times, Bit,” said Speck. He looked out upon the flat brown plain. “Many events and landmarks that Dab Pixel wrote about, we encountered in this place--the Noise, the Shadows, even the flat, wooden terrain. And Dabbler flew in the same direction from the colony as we did and for the same length of time.” He tapped his GPS unit. “Yes, Bit, Grandpa’s theory isn’t as foolish as it seems. I believe we could be in the Land of Megas, the gogs, as the legends called them.”

“But what about the landslants, the Bottomless Crack, and Long Canyon?” Bitty asked. “How can you explain those?”

Speck kissed his daughter’s forehead. “We can’t. When your brother returns, I hope he has some helpful discoveries to report.”

...

Bitty turned and walked toward the pointy end of the pink chamber. Deep in thought, she gazed up at the silver ceiling that ran the full length of the pink chamber. During her recent climb to the hill’s summit, she discovered this ceiling to be a long strip of metal.

“An entire civilization of jumbo beings and outsized things,” she said to herself. “Yes, these pink walls and the metal ceiling could be people-made. Each day Grandpa’s case that we are in the legendary Land of Megas sounds less crazy.”

A centimeter inside the cave the Pixel’s expedition gear--backpacks, tents, sleeping bags, climbing tackle, and science equipment--lay in neat piles. Next to these, Speck had set up the

portable weather station where he tested the air quality and collected temperature data.

A short ways up the curved wall, Grandpa Grain Pixel, a lean man of seventy-five, sat crossed-legged. His white hair was tied in a ponytail and white whiskers lined his jaw. Around his neck hung a shiny white stone on a leather strap.

With his hunting knife, the man was carving on one of the curly wooden logs that the Pixels found strewn around the pink hill. These logs allowed them to build a nightly campfire for cooking and warmth against the February chill.

“What are you making, Grandpa?” Bitty asked.

A former Professor of Geology at Upper Poyntz University, Grandpa Grain now served as the corps’ science specialist. “I’m carving a sound muffler, Bit,” he replied. “My brother Dabbler mentioned making one of these in his journal.”

“But your earplugs work well enough,” Bitty said.

Grandpa Grain took another swipe at the wood. The carving resembled a horn, one end narrow and the other shaped like a bell.

“Earplugs only block the Noise, Bit,” he said. “This sound muffler should also filter it. Enough so we might be able to make out what it is.”

Bitty made a face. “I thought the Noise was just noise. What else could it be?”

“Voices,” Grandpa Grain said solemnly. “The actual words of the gogs. Yes, Bit, I believe that at certain times we’re surrounded by megas, lots of them, all chatting at once.”

Bitty ran a few millimeters up the curved wall and slid down

on her bottom. “So, according to Uncle Dab’s journal, what are these gogs suppose to look like?” she asked.

“No different than you and me,” Grandpa Grain replied. “Only larger, much larger. Dab estimated the megas to be more than 1500 times his size. That means a typical fourth-grade gog would be one-hundred and fifty centimeters tall.”

Bitty’s eyes widened, for she was under a millimeter in height and tall for her age. “So you think the Shadow is one of them, Grandpa? A gog?”

Grandpa Grain nodded. “Yes, I do. And when I’m finished carving this sound muffler, I hope to have a chat with this big, big, big person.”

“You have a lot of faith in Uncle Dab’s book, Grandpa.”

The man set down his knife and pulled a battered leather-bound book from his pocket. Faded words along with the Pixel family crest appeared on the cover.

JOURNEY TO THE LAND OF MEGAS
by Dabbler Pixel



“I have no reason not to believe it, Bit,” said Grandpa Grain. “Even through your Uncle Dab left Upper Poyntz ten years ago and never returned. Do you know that this book, the only trace of Dabble that the search party found, was floating inside a giant soap bubble?”

Bitty ran up the wall again and slid back down. “So, Grandpa, if we are in the Land of Megas and the legends are true, why does the Noise come at regular times?” she asked. “And why does the

Shadow only appear in the south?”

Grandpa Grain whittled another chip from the sound muffler. “Go fetch your logbook, Bit.”

Bitty ran to her backpack and took out a black book. She was the record keeper for the Pixel Corps of Discovery. In this book, she kept a detailed account of the journey’s events. She wrote down what landmarks the Pixels discovered, critical climate information, and such information as how much food and water the family consumed. She also recorded the times that the Noise and Shadow appeared each day.

Bitty sat by her grandfather’s side and opened the logbook. “Let’s see, our plane crashed on Wednesday, February 4, five days ago,” she said. “We first heard the Noise and saw the Shadow on Thursday morning at eight-thirty. They returned at ten, noon, and three in the afternoon. They came again on Friday at the same times, but not on Saturday and Sunday. This morning at eight-thirty and ten, they were back.”

“Read about the landslants, Bit,” said Grandpa Grain.

“Landslants only happen when the Shadow is present. The first landslant occurred on Thursday morning.”

Grandpa Grain shook his head. “That’s when our bush plane slid off into the Nothingness. An unfortunate lose.”

“If this is the Land of Megas, Grandpa, it’s as if we’re in a gog factory or train station, some place with a daily schedule,” said Bitty.

Grandpa Grain fingered the white rock around his neck. “Bit, do you know the myths about the Circle, the ones that tell how the

six colonies divided?”

Bitty nodded. “When the Circle the split apart, each colony moved off in a different direction,” she said. “That’s why we flew eastward from Upper Poyntz. Dad thinks we might find East Poyntz Colony.”

“That was our plan,” said Grandpa Grain. “East Poyntz scientists are the most likely to have a solution to the climate change crisis. Each fraction of a degree rise in temperature has meant drastic change in our way of life. Our colony’s very existence could depend on finding information from other scientists.”

“But we don’t even know if East Poyntz colony ever existed,” said Bitty. “It’s all legend, stories teachers tell.”

“So did your teacher tell you why the Circle broke up?” Grandpa Grain asked.

“When gog settlers arrived, they built a town near the Circle and later a school,” said Bitty. “The colonists wanted to avoid being paved over by a humongous school playground.”

Grandpa Grain held out the white stone and turned it over. On the reverse side was carved a ring with six marks on it. “Now you say that’s all myth, but look at this,” he said. “My father told me that his father, your great-great grandfather, received this bead from an ancient gog family just before the Circle divided?”

Bitty shook her head in disbelief. “So that stone was a gift from the megas?” she said.

“That’s what I was told,” said the man, rubbing his whiskers. “Now, Bit, think about this pink hill we’ve been living in. Imagine it were smaller, much smaller. What do you think it would look like?”

Bitty gazed toward the metal ceiling. "I don't know, something like a garden shed or a child's playhouse."

"No, much smaller. Think of something you might find in your own classroom."

"Like a pencil box?" said Bitty.

"Smaller still. How about a pencil sharpener?"

Bitty blinked in surprise. "You mean one of those small cube things? You turn your pencil in a hole, and the shavings come out the top."

Grandpa Grain nodded.

"I kept one of those in my school desk," said Bitty. "In fact, a pink one."

"And some students keep them on their desktop," said Grandpa Grain. "That's where I think we are."

Bitty laughed. "In a classroom? Oh, come on, Grandpa. First, you want me to believe those silly tall tales, and now you want me to believe I'm sitting in a pencil sharpener on a school desktop."

"Picture your desk at school, Bit. Now where on that desktop was a long groove?"

"At the top where I put my pencil."

"And that, I believe, explains Long Canyon," said Grandpa Grain. "Now, where on your desk was a crack?"

"There was a slot where the desktop opened."

"And on this mega-desk there's the Bottomless Crack," said Grandpa Grain.

Bitty studied more numbers in her logbook. "Funny, it all fits."

Could landslants be the times when the desktop lifts?”

“You got it, Bit. And now, what about the shifting Shadow that only appears in the southern sky?”

“A student!” said Bitty. “A super-sized student sitting at the desk!”

Her grandfather scratched his whiskers. “That’s what I believe.”

...

At that moment, Speck shouted from the mouth of the pink cavern. “Landslant! Brace yourselves!”

Bitty and Grandpa Grain raced to the cave entrance. A landslant was a spectacular event to witness. Now, with Nano out beyond the crack, it was also a worrisome one.

The pink hill began to shake. Speck, Dot, Bitty, and Grandpa Grain looked out to see the entire land on the far side of the Bottomless Crack slant upward in their direction.

“I pray Nano has his suction cups stuck firmly on the white surface,” said Grandpa Grain. “They should hold up to a sixty degree tilt.”

“Nano! Do you read me?” Dot called into her walkie-talkie. Still only static replied. “Oh, why did we let him go out beyond the crack?”

The land continued to rise.

“Nano’s blip on the GPS screen is steady,” said Speck.

“Hang on, Nano,” Grandpa Grain said under his breath.

Bitty held her binoculars to her eyes. “At this angle, the white surface is clearer,” she said. “Curious, parallel blue lines cross it.”

Grandpa Grain stiffened. “What?” He grabbed the binoculars and trained them on the white area. “Bit, what on a school desktop has blue lines?”

Bitty thought a moment before exclaiming, “No! No! Writing paper!”

In the same instant, Dot shouted, “The white ground is moving!”

By now, the raised land beyond the crack blocked the entire southern sky. The four Pixels watched in horror as the vast region of white slid northward. One moment it was there, and the next—*Swoosh!*--it was gone.

“Nano!” Dot cried.

“Grandpa, what happened?” said Bitty.

Grandpa Grain lowered the binoculars. It took him a moment to speak. “He’s gone. The white area was neither snow nor a sheet of ice. I believe it was an enormous sheet of writing paper.” He paused. “And when the gog-student opened the desktop, the piece of paper slid off it.”

Speck, Dot, Bitty, and Grandpa Grain stood staring at the flat wooden land tilting toward them. All four Pixels had the same thought. Nano had dropped off into the Nothingness.

Chapter Five

In which Faith spots the Pixels



Pah! Ever heard of gravity, Faithy?” said Fulton.

“Normal people hold on to a paper before opening their desks.”

Faith propped her desktop open with her head. The heavy lid smushed her frizzy hair as she searched the inside of the desk for her pencil. She pushed aside her math book, three seashells, five acorns, a library book, a wooden ruler, her crayon box, a starfish, her spelling workbook, six wads of tissue, a tape dispenser, and her writing journal. Under a glue bottle, she found her orange pencil case. She took out a yellow pencil and inspected the tip.

“Good and pointy,” she said, nodding with approval.

Faith closed her desk. She placed the new pencil in the pencil groove and leaned into the aisle to retrieve her writing paper. While doing so, her thick glasses fell from her face. Only a canvas strap running around her neck prevented them from dropping to the floor.

“*Pah!*” came a voice behind her.

After replacing her eyeglasses, Faith searched up and down the aisle for the paper. Failing to find it, she turned toward Fulton. He wore his chocolaty grin. Her blue-lined paper lay on his desktop.

“How’d you get that?” she said.

“It sorta floated under my foot, Faithy,” Fulton said. He began reading the story. “One day a creepy fourth-grade girl wanted to find where the universe ended.” He made a face. “What sort of story is this?”

Faith snatched the paper. “It’s about a girl who wants to get as far away from Fulton Benson as possible.”

She spun back around and slapped the paper on the desktop. But as she reached for her pencil, she froze. What did she see? A black dot. A small spot, the size of a period, was gliding along the edge of the pencil groove.

Faith leaned forward. “It’s the same dot I saw on my writing paper,” she said. “Same size; same color. But now it’s moving. What is that thing?”

Seeing that Mrs. Alexander wasn’t looking, Faith slipped from her seat. She stepped to the shelf under the classroom windows. First, she paused by the empty rat cage that had been the home of Gili, the class pet, until he vanished last week. Then she reached into a cardboard box labeled magnifying glasses and took out one of the plastic lenses. She was back in her chair before anyone except Fulton noticed she had left.

“What’s that for?” Fulton asked. “What’r’ya going to look at?”

“If I told you, you’d think I’m crazy,” Faith said over her

shoulder.

“I already think you’re crazy.”

Faith leaned over her desktop. She held the magnifying glass to one eye and moved it up and down until the tiny dot came into focus. Still, all she could make out was a small, black disc, sliding toward the right side of her desk.

“What are you, little thing?” Faith said in her softest voice.

At this point, the black spot had reached the end of the pencil groove. It cut left and paused by a fleck of silver glitter. It turned right and slid straight toward the pink pencil sharpener in the upper right corner.

“You’re not a bug, because you don’t have legs,” said Faith. “You’re not a period or a decimal point, because periods and decimal points don’t move. And why are you moving toward my new sharpener?”

From behind, she heard a voice. “Who’r’ya talking to?”

Faith turned. “Listen, Fulton. There’s a moving black dot on my desktop.”

Fulton grinned, spreading his round cheeks apart. “It’s a cootie, I bet,” he said. “I bet your desk is loaded with cooties.”

“No, this dot was above a t in my story,” said Faith. “Then it moved under an l. Now it’s sliding toward my pencil sharpener.”

“*Pah!*” went Fulton too loudly.

Mrs. Alexander looked up from her desk. “Faith, turn around. I want your story finished by lunchtime.”

Faith faced her desktop again. She picked up her pencil from the pencil groove. She pretended to write, but kept her eyes on the

moving spot. Closer and closer it got to the pink plastic pencil sharpener.

“Just what are you, little thing,” she said under her breath.

When the tiny speck neared the sharpener hole, Faith couldn’t help peering through her magnifying glass again. She moved the lens from the dot to the hole. That’s when she got the shock of her life. Inside the hole, standing four abreast, were four figures, not bugs or anything man-made, but human figures with moving arms, legs, heads, and bodies.

“People,” she said. “Teeny-tiny people. There’s a man, a woman, a bearded older man, and a girl with blond hair, and they’re standing inside my pencil sharpener.”

Faith moved the lens back and forth. She saw that the mini-people wore khaki-colored explorer’s outfits and hiking boots. The man held something like a cell phone, and the woman held a long black stick. The old man was whittling on a pencil shaving with a minuscule knife, and the girl was looking through binoculars.

“It’s like in the Pomo Indian myths Mr. Benson told us,” she said to herself. “Tiny people no bigger than grains of sand. Sand people.”

Faith blew gently on the sharpener.

“Hello. Hello, teeny people,” she said softly. “I’m Faith. Hello, can you hear me?”

Chapter Six

In which Nano returns, and Bitty tests the sound muffler



Dr. Dot Pixel unrolled her long black tube. When needed, the tube served as a stout walking stick. Now it became one of the black roundhats that Grandpa Grain had cut from a scrape of thick paper.

“What are you doing, Dotty?” Speck asked.

“I’m going out there.” Her forehead crinkled. “I’m going to look for Nano.”

“You can’t,” Grandpa Grain said. “Not as long as the Shadow remains. I’m convinced it’s a mega-student. With that roundhat on, you’d appear as nothing more than decimal point to him or her.”

“And who knows what a gog-student might do if he or she spied a decimal point creeping across his or her desktop?” said Speck.

By now, the land beyond the Bottomless Crack had lowered.

“Not a sign of Nano,” said Bitty, scanning the flat surface

through her binoculars.

Speck rechecked his GPS unit. “And still no signal from his tracking beacon.”

Grandpa Grain whittled some more on the end of his sound muffler. “That blast of wind we just felt concerns me,” he said. “It’s possible that the super-sized student has discovered us. I suggest we step back from the mouth of the cave. When is the Shadow scheduled to leave, Bitty?”

“Noon,” she reported. “Eleven minutes from now.”

The four Pixels retreated two millimeters into the pink cavern. Speck kept his eyes on the GPS screen. He was pacing the width of the chamber when—Beep! Beep! Beep—the unit went off.

“I’ve got a reading!” he cried. “A yellow blip! It’s Nano’s signal!”

“Where’s it coming from?” said Dot. “Where is he?”

Speck grew silent before smiling. “Here!” he announced. “The signal is coming from right outside the cave!”

The four Pixels rushed to the cave entrance. They looked down upon a black roundhat. The big circle tilted backward, and there was Nano’s grinning, chocolaty face. He held up a large piece of chocolate cake and his bottle of lemonade

“Hello, Pixels,” he said. “I brought you something to go with our trail stew tonight.”

“Nano, you’re safe!” cried Dot.

“How’d you get across the crack?” asked Speck.

“Before you answer any question, Nano, climb into the cave,” said Grandpa Grain. “You could be in plain view of a gog.”

“Ha-haaa! A gog?” he said. “Are you still going on about that tired theory of yours, Grandpa? The Land of Megas! Ha-haa! I found no evidence of any whopping big people out there. But wait until you hear what I did find.”

Speck helped Nano climb into the pink cavern. Dot took some bandages from fanny pack and checked him for cuts and scrapes. When she found none, she smothered him with kisses.

“Were you on the white area during the landslant?” Bitty asked.

“Sure was,” said Nano. “Luckily, when the land began to shake, I was already on my feet fetching my water bottle. Man, did I peel out of there. When I reached the edge of the white area, I leaped off. What a ride! My roundhat acted like a parachute, and I landed softly by the rim of Long Canyon.”

“You were lucky, Nano,” said Grandpa Grain. “I believe the white region was a sheet of mega-writing paper resting upon a super-duper desktop.”

“And Long Canyon is the pencil groove,” said Bitty.

Nano broke off a chunk of the chocolate cake and took a bite. “Well, whatever the canyon is,” he said, with his mouth full, “it’s now filled with a humongous yellow log.”

“A mega-pencil no doubt,” said Grandpa Grain.

“Tell us what you did next, Nano,” said Speck.

“How did you get back here?” asked Dot.

“When I looked south, I saw the landslant lowering, so I took off eastward,” Nano said.

“That was careless to do with the Shadow still present,” said

Grandpa Grain.

“And you forgot to turn on your walkie-talkie,” said Dot.

“Or check your tracking beacon,” said Speck.

“At least I remembered to wear my roundhat,” said Nano.

“And to bring this chocolate cake with me.”

“We were hoping for something more healthy than cake,” said Dot. She sniffed the contents of the water bottle. “And I hope you didn’t pour out fresh water for this stuff.”

“You were supposed to be collecting air samples, not cake and lemonade,” said Speck.

Nano shrugged. This was the usual reception his family gave him whenever he did something exciting.

At that moment, a deep roar resounded throughout the chamber.

Grandpa Grain frowned. “And perhaps Nano, you also brought us trouble,” he said. He held up the trumpet-shaped sound muffler. “I think this thing is ready to be tested. Perhaps if we can understand the gog-student’s words, we can learn what he or she knows about us.”

He handed the wooden instrument to Bitty. “Hear, Bit, you do the testing,” he said. “Your young ears can make out voices better than mine.”

Bitty placed the small end of the trumpet against her ear.

More rumbling filled the cavern, and she pulled the muffler away, grimacing.

“Still too loud,” she said.

Speck removed a red bandana from his pocket. He stuffed it

in the mouth of the trumpet.

“That better?” he asked. “Listen closely, Bit. Can you make out any familiar sound? Any voices?”

With the next noisy blast, Bitty winced again. Then she grinned. “Wait, wait. I heard words,” she said. “A girl is talking.” More sound came. “Yes, yes a girl is saying something.”

Grandpa Grain flung up his arms. “That’s proof!” he cried. “We’re in the Land of Megas! Dabbler’s journal is real!”

“And if Uncle Dab’s journal is true, everything told in the folk tales could be true, too,” said Bitty.

Nano dropped his piece of cake. “You mean there are super-sized people out there?”

“Yes, and this could explain the carbon dioxide overload our atmosphere,” said Speck. “Let’s estimate there are a few thousand gogs in the world. That means there are at least a few hundred colossal cars and buses that have been spewing out an enormous amount of exhaust.”

“Quiet everyone,” said Grandpa Grain. “What is the gog girl saying, Bitty?”

Roars continued coming from the south, and Bitty beamed.

“The girl said Faith. My name is Faith. Hello! Hello!”

“Faith?” said Nano. “What sort of name is Faith?”

“Shhh! Shhh!” went Bitty. “She’s calling to us...She said... Can you see me, teeny people?...Can you hear me?...Oh, I can’t make out the rest.”

“So the Shadow, the mega-student, knows we’re here,” said Dot. “That concerns me.”

“But why is she calling us teeny people?” said Nano. “We’re not teeny; we’re normal size, and she’s ginormous.”

Another roar filled the chamber, this one deeper.

“Wait,” said Bitty. “That’s a different voice. A boy’s.” She turned her ear trumpet southward. “The gog-boy said...You’re crazy, Faithy. Stop talking to your pencil sharpener.”

“He means this pink mountain,” said Grandpa Grain.

“A pencil sharpener?” said Nano. “You mean, we’ve been living in a pencil sharpener for the past five days?”

“Shhh!” went Bitty. She pointed the ear trumpet upward again. “Faith called the gog-boy Fulton. She said, ‘Talking to this sharpener is more interesting than talking with you, Fulton.’”

The Pixels laughed.

“Those colossal kids sound like my own children when they squabble?” said Speck.

Now Bitty’s expression turned serious. “Wait! Fulton just said, ‘I need to sharpen my pencil, Faithy. Give me that sharpener.’”

“What’s he talking about?” said Dot. “Our shelter? What’s he going to do to us?”

Speck checked his watch. “Earplugs everyone,” he said. “The Noise is about to begin again.”

“Lucky for us,” said Grandpa Grain. “It’s lunchtime in the gog-classroom.”

Soon after the five Pixels inserted their rubber earplugs, the Noise resounded through the pink chamber. When it died, the family ran to the mouth of the cave and looked out. The southern

sky was clear; the Shadow had gone.

“This pink mountain...this pencil sharpener is no longer safe,” said Speck.

“According to my logbook, the next Noise is due in an hour when Faith and Fulton will return,” said Bitty.

“Go collect your gear, Pixels,” said Speck. “We’re leaving at once.”

“But where to?” asked Dot. “The world outside is flat and open. The megas will spot us wherever we go.”

Nano pointed westward. “Long Canyon!” he said. “Even with the yellow log in it, there’s still plenty of room for us to slid down.”

Speck checked his GPS unit. “The eastern end of Long Canyon is two point three centimeters from here,” he said. “It will be close, but we can reach it in an hour. Push on!”

Without another word, the Pixels ran to collect their gear. Soon, lugging heavy backpacks, they were climbing down from the mouth of the pink cave. In single file—Speck, Dot, Nano, Bitty, and Grandpa Grain—they hiked westward at a brisk pace. Grandpa Grain had the sound muffler strapped over his shoulder. Each Pixel used a roundhat tube for a walking stick. If the Shadow reappeared before they reached Long Canyon, under the hats would be the only place for them to hide.

The Pixels hiked without speaking. No one bothered to look back at the pink box-shaped mountain, the place that had been their home since landing in this strange new world.

Chapter Seven

In which we meet Dr. Carbo, and Fulton causes problems



Hello? Hello? Where are you, teeny people? It's me, Faith. I'm back. Hello, sand people."

Lunch recess had ended, and Faith sat at her desk. She held the magnifying glass close to the pink pencil sharpener. Her classmates were still mingling about the room, chatting, laughing, and roughhousing.

Seeing no sign of her tiny guests, Faith tilted her head sideways to peer farther into the sharpener hole. As she did, a hand blocked her view. Two chubby fingers pinched the pink plastic cube and whisked it away.

Faith fell back in her chair, too stunned to speak.

Fulton stood next to her desk. He held the pencil sharpener in one hand and an unsharpened pencil in the other.

"No! No!" Faith sputtered. "Don't!"

"*Pah!* I just want to sharpen my pencil, Faithy," Fulton said.

“That’s what sharpeners are for.”

Faith frantically tried to grab the sharpener. But Fulton held it above his head, out of reach.

“Relax, Faithy,” he said. “You act as if I’m committing a murder or something.”

Then he crammed his pencil into the hole.

“No!” Faith cried.

In horror, she watched Fulton turned his pencil around and around inside the sharpener hole. Long peels of shavings flowed out the top and fell to the floor.

“You don’t know what you’ve done,” she said, shaking her head.

Finally, Fulton returned the sharpener to Faith’s desktop and sat down at his desk.

Faith’s eyes teared with rage. She pushed back her glasses and turned. “You killed them,” she said. “You killed them.”

Fulton’s face went blank. “What? Who? When?”

Too furious to say another word, Faith looked toward the classroom door. Dr. Carbo, the science teacher, stood there. He wore a white lab coat buttoned around his large belly. A thin black goatee pointed down from his chin and a single strand of black hair crossed the top of his head.

Mrs. Alexander stood up from her desk. “Class, it’s time for science,” she said. “Please give Dr. Carbo your utmost attention.”

Dr. Carbo stepped up to the whiteboard. He had been teaching science at the school for twenty years, and although everyone called him Doctor, no one knew why.

When not in a classroom, the science teacher spent his time in a small room down the hall. This room, a former supply closet, had a sign on the door stating: **Science Laboratory Keep Out**, and since no one was allowed inside, no one knew what went on in there. Often, however, while passing the door on their way to recess, students would hear noises--squeals, squeaks, yips, and whimpers. Curiously, these animal sounds were most common shortly after a classroom pet such as Gili, the rat in Faith's room, went missing.

Now Dr. Carbo pulled rimless eyeglasses from his lab coat pocket and placed them on his forehead.

"Today, fourth-graders, we'll read about life cycles," he said. "Take out your science books."

Still blurry-eyed, Faith opened her desk. She shoved aside her crayon box, her scissors, a pack of smelly pens, and a wad of paper. Her fingers landed in a puddle of glue. She wiped them off on her blue jeans and pulled out her brown science book.

"Life cycles are changes in the life of an animal from an egg to an adult," the science teacher called out. With a shake of his head, his eyeglasses dropped onto his nose. He peered at the fourth-grade science book, teacher's edition, in his hands. "Fulton Benson, read page eighty about the life cycle of a flea. Ha! Even the tiny unfeeling flea has a life cycle."

As Fulton read aloud, Faith tried reading along, but the sight of all the periods made her weep. Her gaze slid toward the pink pencil sharpener and quickly turned away. How could she bear to think about what had happened inside there?

She wiped a tear off her cheek and reached for her pencil. But wait. Something on the desktop moved. She held her breath. Yes, something was moving to the right of the pencil groove.

“One...two...three...four...five,” she counted. “Five moving specks!”

Faith grabbed the hand lens and held it to the dots.

“It’s you!” she said. “You’re alive, teeny people! I thought you were in my pencil sharpener, but there you are. And look, you have on itty-bitty backpacks and are carrying itty-bitty walking sticks.”

Up front, Dr. Carbo called on someone else to read.

“Reading about fleas makes me itch,” Fulton said behind Faith, but she was too busy studying the dots to hear him.

By now, the tiny hikers were a half-centimeter from the pencil groove. Most likely, the man and woman in the lead were parents, for they kept turning to scold the boy and girl who were probably brother and sister, since they were constantly bickering. The old man in the rear could be the grandfather.

“You’re a family, I bet,” Faith said under her breath. “A teeny family of hikers.”

She noticed that the old man carried the wooden trumpet that she had seen him carving inside the pencil sharpener. The minute girl now grabbed the instrument, and held it to her ear.

“Can you hear me?” Faith whispered. “Can you see me? I can see you, teeny girl. Are you a sand person?” She lowered the lens. “You’re very pretty. I like your clothes and hair.” She touched her own hair that was so frizzy it often broke combs she tried to run through it. “Don’t be scared. I won’t hurt you. Your family can

stay in my pencil sharpener as long as your want.”

“Miss Singer!”

Faith jolted and looked toward the front of the room.

Dr. Carbo was glaring at her. “I see you’re holding a magnifying glass,” he said. “Please tell the class what is more interesting to look at than your science book.”

“Nothing,” Faith answered. She dropped the lens and held her hand over the five dots.

“Nothing?” said the science teacher.

“No, nothing. Not a thing.”

Dr. Carbo frowned. He addressed the class again. “Very well, now I’ll draw the life cycle of a butterfly on the whiteboard.”

The science teacher turned and picked up a felt pen from the whiteboard tray. On the board, he drew a large, black circle.

While the teacher worked, Faith reached for her hand lens again. But as she leaned forward, something splashed the back of her neck. Damp spots stained her science book. She spun around to find Fulton pointing a squirt bottle at her face.

“Boohoo!” he said. “More tears for Faithy.”

Short jets of water shot from the plastic bottle. They splattered the lenses of Faith’s eyeglasses.

“No, Fulton!” she said.

She reeled back around and checked her desktop. The five hikers had almost reached the pencil groove. But as she held out her hand to protect them, more water flew over her shoulder. One drop splashed her arm. Another struck her pencil sharpener.

“No Fulton, stop. Please, stop. You’ll drown them!”

“Boohoo, Faithy! Boohoo!”

Faith held both hands over the dot people, but too late. One drop had landed upon the blond-haired girl.

Chapter Eight

In which the Pixels decide to enter the desk



“Bitty, hold on!” Dr. Dot Pixel shouted.

Bitty Pixel swam around inside the giant dome of water. The huge liquid sphere had fallen from the sky and landed on the girl, trapping her inside. Now, unable to hold her breath much longer, she frantically beat her fist against the outer skin of the watery bubble.

Speck tore off his backpack. He pulled out a hatchet.

“Stand far back, everyone,” he shouted. “This will be a gusher.”

Speck raised the hatchet above his head. He brought it down full force on the outside of the water drop. The bubble burst and the water flooded out taking Bitty and Speck along with it.

Moments later, Speck found himself treading water in the middle of a large pond. “Bitty! Bitty!” he called out.

He spied his daughter a short distance away, floating face down. The wooden sound muffler strapped over her shoulder kept

her afloat.

“Bitty!” Speck called again, and swam toward her. He grabbed her by the arm and sidestroked toward the closest shoreline.

Grandpa Grain and Nano waded into the water to help lift Bitty. They lay her behind a large rubber boulder, out of sight from the mega-student whose dark form remained in the southern sky.

Dot, her face pinched, pushed on her daughter’s chest. “Come on! Come on!” she said.

She breathed into her mouth.

“Breathe, Bit! Breathe!” she said, pushing on her chest some more.

Finally, Bitty coughed. Water flowed from her mouth, and she coughed some more.

Dot sat back and smiled. “She’ll be all right.”

Bitty coughed again and rose onto her elbows. “Mom? Dad?” she sputtered. “What happened?”

Speck pointed to the nearby pond. “One second we were hiking and the next you were underwater,” he said.

“Where’s the sound muffler?” said Bitty, still coughing. “I need to hear what’s going on.”

Nano had retrieved the wooden instrument from the pond. He handed it to his sister. As she held it to her ear, a roar came from the south.

“It’s Faith,” she said. “She said... I’m sorry! Are you OK, teeny-people?”

Nano shook his head. “Teeny-people? I still don’t get that.”

“Before she asked if we were sand people,” said Bitty. “Like in

the old myths.”

“That could be a sign that these megas are friendly,” said Speck.

A gust of wind swept across the plain, and the Pixels huddled behind the rubber boulder.

“I suspect Faith just turned a page in a book,” said Grandpa Grain.

“And the book landing on the desktop caused the recent earthquake,” said Speck.

Bitty took off her boots and began wringing out a sock. “You mean deskquake,” she said.

“That gog, Fulton is definitely not friendly,” said Dot, wiping her brow with her bandana. “This desktop is too dangerous. If only we could contact home.”

Nano squeezed water out of his roundhat tube. “Then Colonel Tittle could come and bring us food,” he said.

“So why was our radio signal cut off from the colony?” asked Bitty. “I miss talking to Smidge and my other friends. They must think we’ve dropped off the edge of the earth.”

“I suspect a mega-barrier is blocking the signal,” Grandpa Grain said. “It’s possible that we flew into this classroom through an open window, and afterward a gog closed it.”

“That means no rescue crew will be coming,” said Speck. “We’re on our own.”

“And we need to find a safe shelter,” said Dot.

In silence, the Pixels scanned the landscape. Far to the east, the pink hill loomed on the horizon. A short distance westward was

the rim of Long Canyon. Now a large dome-shaped water drop blocked the eastern entrance.

Speck checked his GPS unit. "There's one place we haven't thought about," he said. "The Bottomless Crack runs thirteen millimeters due south of here."

Grandpa Grain nodded. "And since we now know we're on a desktop, we know that crack isn't bottomless."

"Bitty and Nano, think about your desk at school," Speck said. "How far was it from the lid to the top items inside?"

"My desk was always crammed with junk," said Nano. "There was zero space."

"I kept my desk tidy," Bitty said. "There was enough room to fit my lunchbox."

"In gog-scale that's about eight centimeters," said Grandpa Grain.

"We don't have enough rope to climb down that far," said Speck. "Let's hope that Faith isn't as tidy as Bitty or as messy as Nano."

Bitty pointed the ear trumpet northward. "Wait, I just heard a deep man's voice," she said. "It's distant, but he's a teacher, I'm sure. The man said something about science. I think he's a science teacher."

Grandpa Grain ran his fingers through his white hair. "A science teacher?" he said. "Curious. The first mega my brother, Dab, met was a science teacher. Let's hope that isn't the same one."

"Why? What happened?" asked Bitty.

“Some other time, Bit,” said Grandpa Grain. “It’s a scary tale best suited to tell around a campfire on a chilly, dark night.”

Speck raised his roundhat tube. “As for now, we must get off this desktop,” he said. “First, fill your water bottles, everyone. Then let’s push on to the not-so Bottomless Crack.”

The Pixels gathered their gear and raced southward. Once at the rim of the wide, straight crevice, Dot and Bitty gathered rubber boulders and made a tall pile. Speck and Nano unraveled the nylon climbing rope and tied one end to the rock pile for an anchor.

Meanwhile, Grandpa Grain shone his flashlight into the dark abyss. He dropped in a piece of wood and listened for it to hit bottom.

“Can’t see or hear how deep it is,” he said.

Nano strapped on his rock climbing harness. “There’s one way to find out,” he said. “I’ll go down and look around.”

“No, Nano, Bitty better do it,” said Dot.

But Nano was already standing on edge of the fissure, clipping his harness to the rope. He strapped a headlamp to his forehead and faced his family.

“You have your walkie-talkie turned on?” Speck asked.

Nano slapped a pocket and nodded.

“And your tracking beacon?” asked Grandpa Grain.

Nano slapped another pocket.

“Oh, Nano don’t be careless down there,” said Dot. “No swinging on the rope or stunts of any kind.”

“I know, I know,” said Nano, leaning backward.

Then he waved and lowered himself over the rim. The others

stood on the ledge and watched him descend.

“Yip! Yip!” came Nano’s echoey cry. “Smells like my desk at school down here-- crayons and old books.”

Soon all the four Pixels on top could see was the twinkle of his headlamp, many millimeters below them.

Chapter Nine

In which Faith assists Nano



“Miss Singer!” Dr. Carbo called out. “Read page eight-four.”

Faith Singer pushed back her thick eyeglasses. She flipped a page in her science book and began reading about the life cycle of butterflies. When her turn was over, she grabbed the magnifying lens and held it near the slot in her desktop. She moved slowly to avoid drawing attention to the four micro-hikers who stood there.

At this point, the tiny man, woman, girl, and old man were peering into the crack. The man talked into a tiny walkie-talkie. A small pile of eraser crumbs stood beside them. Faith moved the lens toward the pencil sharpener and pencil groove. Where was the fifth dot, the boy?

“Could he have fallen down the slot?” Faith asked herself. “Maybe he’s inside my desk. Maybe he’s hurt and needs help.”

In the front of the room, Dr. Carbo snapped his teacher’s book shut. “That’s all you need to know about life cycles, fourth-graders,” he said. “Don’t forget to finish your life cycle science

projects for homework. Good day.”

As the teacher stepped from the room, Faith slid her science book onto her lap. She slowly raised her desktop. Enough light flooded into the desk for her to see the area under the crack. Her science project--pasta glued on white paper to represent the food cycle of a frog—lay beneath the spot where the teeny people stood. But she saw no boy.

“Where is he? Where is the little guy?”

Holding the plastic lens to her eye, Faith leaned far forward. Still she spied nothing unusual. She moved the lens to the left and stopped. There he was. The boy hung on the end of a slender thread thinner than a silk strand in a spider’s web. He dangled an inch above the science project.

Faith hardly breathed. “Hello! Hello!” she said softly.

Even this slight breeze her breath made sent the boy swinging back and forth. A sparkle of light came from the top of his head.

“What are you doing inside my desk, little guy?” Faith asked. “Do you want to get down? Here, I’ll help you.”

Faith slid a library book on top of her science project. She pushed her orange pencil case on top of the book. The plastic case left the smallest space below the boy’s feet.

“Now jump down, little guy,” she said. “Jump.”

When the boy remained hanging there, Faith slipped three scraps of construction paper—blue, yellow, and red--under him.

“Drop, little fellow,” she said. “Come on, you can do it.”

Finally, the boy unclipped something at his chest and fell onto the red paper. He scrambled to his feet and turned toward Faith.

“Maybe the rest of your family wants to come down, too,” Faith said.

As she spoke, a juicy spit wad whizzed past her right ear. It landed on the red paper, close to where the boy stood.

“No, Fulton! Stop!” Faith shouted. She leaned back, letting her desktop slammed shut.

“*Pah!* Talking to your cooties, Faithy?” the boy behind her said.

Faith was too upset to answer. What had she done? Shouted. Slammed her desktop. Did she harm the tiny boy inside her desk or the people on top? From now on, she had to be careful. From now on, she could never lose her temper, no matter what Fulton did or said.

Chapter Ten

In which the Pixels begin their descent



peck Pixel called into his walkie-talkie. “Nano, can you read me? Nano, are you all right?”

The four Pixels leaned over the crevasse. More static came from Speck’s walkie-talkie.

“Something’s wrong,” said Dot. “Nano’s rope is slack.”

“Odd time for a landslant,” said Bitty. “How scary that was this close to the crack.”

Grandpa Grain shown his flashlight into the dark fissure. “I figure that the loud blast following the quake was Faith slamming her desk shut,” he said. “Not a good sign. My ears are still ringing.”

At that moment, the walkie-talkie crackled.

“Yip! Yip! I made it!” came Nano’s cheery voice. “I’m standing on solid red ground.”

The four Pixels on the surface exchanged smiles and hugs.

“Nano, you had us worried,” Speck said into the walkie-talkie.”

“Again,” Dot added.

“Come on down, everyone,” said Nano. “It’s awe-stupendous!”

Speck, Dot, Bitty, and Grandpa Grain quickly strapped on their rock climbing belts, clips, and headlamps. They would leave their roundhats on the surface.

“OK, Grain, you first,” said Speck. “Let’s hurry. Who knows when the next landslant or deskquake will occur?”

Soon Grandpa Grain was gliding down the rope. How tempted he was to stop and take samples of the desktop layers that he passed through, but he kept going. Once he had joined Nano on the red ground, Bitty and Dot dropped down. Speck came last. He had tied a special knot to the anchor, so when he yanked on the rope it fell after him.

The crack, now far overhead, offered faint light, so Dot pulled a flare from her fanny pack and lit it. For a long moment, the Pixels stood in silence, taking in the wonders that the light reveled.

Twisty and curvy shapes of all sizes and colors surrounded them. To the north rose three colossal columns—green-yellow, indigo, and red-orange--and southward stood a row of towering silver arches. Below the arches, the light reflected off a rippling golden wall that made the Pixels squirt, and overhead the desktop ignited in colorful twinkles and flashes like so many fireworks going off.

“Out of this world,” said Dot, waving her flare back and forth. The words echoed in some far off place.

“No, we’re still very in our own world,” said Speck. “Only in a place we never imagined before.”

“While I hung from the climbing rope, the ground rose and changed from white, to brown, to orange, to blue, to yellow, then to red,” Nano said.

Nearby stood a large white sphere covered with thick slime.

“Eww, gross!” said Bitty. “What is that?”

“It came out of nowhere,” said Nano. “It nearly clobbered me when it landed.”

Speck checked his GPS unit. “We descended over two centimeters. Grain, how deep do you think this mega-desk runs?”

“Twelve to fifteen centimeters,” said Grandpa Grain.

“That’s quite a trek,” said Speck. “But we need to reach the bottom.

“Why?” asked Dot. “What do you expect to find there?”

“A way out,” said Speck. “An exit from this desk.”

“At Upper Poyntz Elementary School, my desk had a clean-out hole in the metal bottom,” said Bitty. “I pushed scraps, pencils shavings and crayon wrappings out of it.”

“My desk had a hole, too,” said Nano. “Smack in the center.”

Speck pressed some buttons on his GPS. “If we’re lucky, this mega-desk will have such a hole. I’m guessing that the center is southwest of here, and roughly ten centimeters farther down.”

By now the flare had gone out, and the five Pixels turned on their headlamps. This placed five white circles on the forms around them.

“Every journey begins with a first step,” said Dot.

Speck kissed his wife and said, “Push on!”

With their headlamp beams pointing the way, the Pixels hiked

westward. The air was chilly and still. The smell was a mixture of crayon wax, perfume, chocolate, erasers, and noodles. From above came a hollow tap, tap, tapping, and Grandpa Grain argued that it was the sound of Faith's pencil completing math problems on her desktop.

After a short distance, the explorers stepped off the soft red surface onto a slippery, orange one.

With his rock hammer, Grandpa Grain chipped off a chunk of the hard ground. "Gog-made plastic," he said, upon inspecting it. "Same as the pencil sharpener."

A dull thud came from below and the whole place vibrated.

"What's Faith doing now?" asked Bitty.

"Can't tell," said Speck. "But we need to look out for any shifting books or topping school supplies while we're down here."

Two centimeters farther on, the family stood on a steep ledge. Their headlamps revealed that the climb down was a short one, less than a centimeter, but still the rope would be needed.

This time Bitty went first. She rappelled down the rope by bouncing her legs off the orange wall. When she reached the bottom, her light reflected upon a bright blue surface. One after the other, the other Pixels joined her.

Grandpa Grain studied the ground with his geologist's lens. "A cardboard-like material," he said.

"Could be the cover of a paperback book," said Bitty.

"A good sign," said Speck. "I feel safer being inside the desk of a student who likes to read."

The Pixels marched across the flat plain. It changed from

blue, to white, to black, and back to blue. An hour's hike brought them to yet another drop-off, this one much deeper. After a long slide down the rope, they stood in a dark narrow ravine. A yellow wall rose to the west and a shiny tan one to the east.

"By the color and odor I suspect the western wall is a crayon box," said Speck.

Grandpa Grain nodded. "The tan wall could be the spine of a textbook. This alleyway is the space left between the two."

In single file, the five Pixels proceeded up the passageway. Often fleecy gray bushes blocked their path, and Speck had to cut through these with his machete.

"Mega-dust," Grandpa Grain said.

"Super-sized dust bunnies!" Bitty added.

"Faith's desk seems as messy as my desk," said Nano.

The yellow and green walls ended at the junction of two narrow passages.

"It's a giant maze down here," said Dot.

"I only wish the alleys ran downward more," Speck said. "We must keep descending to reach the cleanout hole."

The Pixels turned left. They turned right and left again. As they filed up this passage, Bitty pointed her headlamp beam upward. The circle of light fell upon a white icicle-shaped formation hanging directly overhead.

"A stalactite!" she said, remembering the term from science class. "They hang from the ceiling of caves."

"Except this isn't a cave," said Grandpa Grain. "Something's leaking down here."

“I once spilled a whole carton of milk in my desk,” said Nano. “But I don’t think that’s milk.”

At that moment, a giant glob of white goo, bigger than all the Pixels combined, flowed down the northern wall. It oozed into the passageway behind the hikers, filling its entire width.

Grandpa Grain stuck a finger into the white blob. “Glue,” he said. “That’s the tip of a leaking glue bottle above us.”

A second white glob ran down the wall. It merged with the one in the narrow ravine. The goopy mass towered over the Pixels.

“Watch out!” cried Speck. “That white wall is about to break. Run for it!”

No sooner had he spoke when a third glob added to the pile and the entire white mass flowed toward the Pixels. They took off, sprinting up the canyon with their backpacks pounding against their backs.

Nano, last in line, looked over his shoulder. The white torrent was less than ten millimeters behind him. “The glue’s still coming,” he said. “It’s gaining on us.”

“We must climb out of here,” said Dot.

Grandpa Grain stopped to check the ravine’s northern wall. “Sheets of paper,” he said. “It will support our weight.”

“Up! Up!” cried Speck. “Hurry!”

All five Pixels scrambled up the bottom layer of the wall. Hardly had they left the ground before the glue flowed under them.

“Keep climbing,” shouted Dot. “The glue is rising.”

The explorers scaled another level and another. The glue rose as well. Layer by layer, page by page, they climbed until, finally,

they stood safely above the swelling white river.

Not for another hour did the Pixels reach the top. Exhausted, they threw down their backpacks and lay upon a flat, yellow surface.

“We’re suppose to be going down not up,” said Nano still breathing hard.

“Faith is going to have a big mess to clean up,” said Bitty.

At that moment, a bright light spread across the entire scene. The Pixels squinted until their eyes became used to the glare. To the south loomed the blurry Shadow.

“The gog-girl has opened her desk again,” said Grandpa Grain.

“Three o’clock,” said Dot, checking her watch. “School is out, and she’ll be going home.”

“We’re not safe here,” said Speck.

Nano pointed to an overhang a short distance to the north. Silver in color, it was straight and many centimeters long.

“We can hide under there,” he said.

“I can think of only one long metal thing inside a school desk,” said Bitty. “That must be humongous pair of gog-scissors.”

Chapter Eleven

In which Fulton makes more deskquakes



“What a mess,” Faith Singer said. “Glue everywhere.”

She held her desktop open with her head. The afternoon bell was about to ring, and she needed to get her science project for homework. What she found instead was the spilled glue.

Faith grabbed the glue bottle and wiped off the tip with a tissue.

“Teeny people?” she called out. “Where are you? Are you OK?”

With the magnifying glass, Faith searched for the period-sized family. She held the lens under the desktop slot. The red paper was bare, and the slender thread was gone. She moved the lens over her pencil case, paperback book, and crayon box. She pulled out her science project and checked the cover of her social studies book. Finally, she spied the five specks on her pair of scissors. They were hiking along the silver blade with a thread strung between like mountain climbers on a glacier.

“Hello there,” she said. “Thank goodness you didn’t run into that sticky mess.”

Through her lens, Faith saw the blond girl stop and look in her direction. She held the trumpet carving to her ear.

“Can you hear me?” Faith said. “I wish I could hear you. Where are you going? Where are you from? Are you a sand person? Do you live in a colony? I’m from right here, and I’m in fourth grade.”

To Faith’s surprise, the tiny girl pointed to herself, then nodded.

“You’re in fourth grade, too?” said Faith. “That means we’re the same age. What’s your teacher like? How tall is your teacher? What’s your favorite subject? What books do you read?”

The tiny girl, however, made no more gestures. Faith saw the old man call to her, and the girl ran to catch up with him.

At this point, the minute hikers had reached the oval handle of the scissors. They cut left and climbed onto Faith’s purple velvet-covered eyeglass case.

Faith pushed back her glasses. Seeing that the blond girl held the trumpet to her ear again, she went on talking. “I wish I knew your name. I want to know all about you. Do you go to After-School Club after school as I do? I go there every day, since my mom works at a library. Today’s different, though. Today my mom’s picking me up early to take me to the eye doctor. The eye doctor will give me drops and maybe a patch.”

Faith pulled a tissue from the small packet she kept in the front of her desk. She began mopping up the glue by her blue

notebook, careful not to disturb her eyeglass case.

“My eyes are bad,” she went on. “The eye doctor says they’ll never get better. I’ll be blind some day. But maybe one eye will last until I get through college. I want to be a scientist when I grow up, but I don’t know what science I can do with no eyesight.”

Faith was wiping glue off her crayon box when something bumped her desk. She sat up, holding the desktop open with one hand.

Fulton stood next to her desk. His hand gripped the front corner. “*Pah!* What’d ya doing in there, Faithy? Spill something?” He shook the desk some more.

“Don’t Fulton! Don’t!”

Inside her desk, Faith saw books and folders slide side to side. Crayons spilled from their box, and the pencil case toppled over.

“Stop! Stop!”

Fulton grinned. “What’ll you give me, Faithy?”

Faith thought quickly. “I’ll show you something instead. The most amazing thing you’ve ever seen.”

Fulton made a face. “And what could that be?”

At that moment, the bell rang.

“You are dismissed class,” Mrs. Alexander announced.

Slowly, Faith closed her desktop. “Fulton, I wasn’t kidding when I told you there are five tiny people living in my desk. They’re not cooties; they’re people, human people, so small you can hardly see them without a magnifying glass. They are hiking and climbing. When you shook my desk you might have hurt them or worse.”

Fulton let go of the desk. A pained expression crossed his

face. "You mean like sand people?"

"Yes, yes," said Faith. "Like in the Pomo myths your grandfather told our class about."

"Sand people?" Fulton repeated. "OK, show me."

"Not now. Are you going to After-School Club?"

The boy nodded.

"So sneak back here after you check in," Faith said.

"OK, Faithy. But this better be good. If you're fooling with me, I'm turning your desk upside down."

Faith rose from her seat. "Meet me back here in ten minutes."

Chapter Twelve

In which the Pixels see something big, black, and alive



The rubber block had fallen during the deskquake. Amidst the rocking walls and falling debris, the huge pink thing toppled over and pinned Dot's leg against the purple ground.

Speck was the first one to his feet. When his headlight fell upon Dot lying next to the rubber wall, he rushed to her side.

"You're held down good, Dotty!" he said. "Can you move your toes? Does it hurt?"

Dot wiggled her toes and smiled. "No bones broken," she said. "I'm the doctor, remember?"

The other Pixels joined them.

"That was the worst deskquake yet," said Nano.

"Fulton caused it," said Bitty. "I heard Faith tell him to stop."

Grandpa Grain tried digging under Dot's leg with the camp shovel, but the purple ground was too hard to make a dent.

Speck raced into the darkness. He returned carrying a long

metal pole that he wedged under the rubber brick.

“Leverage will get this thing off you, Dotty,” he said. “Come on, everyone.”

Speck, Nano, Bitty and Grandpa Grain put their shoulders under the pole. They heaved upward, but the block wouldn’t budge.

“I suspect this huge brick is one of Faith’s erasers,” said Grandpa Grain. “Right color and smell. But we have no idea of its size.”

“Night’s falling, and the air’s getting chilly,” said Speck. “No global warming down here. Nano, go collect some wood and build a fire. Bitty, you stay with your mother. Grandpa and I will circle this rubber thing and figure out how to move it.”

“What can I do?” said Dot.

Speck placed a rolled-up sleeping bag under his wife’s head for a pillow. “Don’t move and get plenty of rest, Doctor.”

Soon after Grandpa Grain and Speck took off, Nano had a campfire crackling. It cast a golden glow against the tall rubber wall. Nano and Bitty sat in the pool of light at their mother’s side. Outside the circle was blackness and silence.

Dot removed some trail biscuits from her fanny pack and passed them out.

“Now, Bit, just what were you and that gog-girl talking about back there?” she asked.

“Faith is the same age as I am,” said Bitty. “She seems very nice. Do you know her eyes are bad? She told me she has an eye disease. Sometimes she wears a patch. And guess what? She

wants to be a scientist, too, someday. I wonder what she looks like.”

“She could have five eyes and blue skin, as far as we know,” said Nano. “So far, we don’t know what any of the gogs looks like.

Bitty made a face. “I bet she’s beautiful,” she said.

“Well, Faith might be nice, but that Fulton is trouble,” said Dot. “We can’t trust any gog until we know more about them.”

At that moment, something clicked at the edge of the darkness. The three Pixels shone their headlights toward the sound but saw nothing.

“Just paper crinkling,” said Bitty. “I hear that when I stick my head inside my school desk.”

Louder sound came, a noisy rustling.

“That’s not paper,” said Nano. “Something is moving around down here. Some big, big living thing.”

Again the Pixels pointed their lights into the darkness. They glimpsed a monstrous creature, long, black, and shiny, moving across the purple ground.

“That was bigger than an Upper Poyntz school bus,” said Nano.

“With lots of legs and two quivering antennae,” said Bitty. “And its Hula Hoop size eyes starred right at us.”

“The creature, whatever it was, seems leery of light,” said Nano, tossing more curly logs on the fire. “I’ll keep the fire stoked.”

“And here’s Dad’s machete,” said Bitty, pulling the long blade from Speck’s backpack.

Dot rubbed her shin. “And I have the emergency flare gun,”

she said, taking the pistol from her fanny pack.

Once armed, the three Pixels huddled near the flame. They shone their headlights in every direction.

Shortly, a different sound, footsteps, came from the darkness. Dot held up the flare gun, and Bitty waved the machete.

To their relief a familiar voice said, "It's us," and Speck stepped into the firelight. Grandpa Grain walked behind him, carrying more wood.

"Did you see it?" said Nano.

"A bug bigger than our bush plane," said Bitty

Speck knelt by Dot and checked her leg. "Yes," he said.

"What was it?" asked Bitty. "A mega-mite? A gog-flea?"

Grandpa Grain laid some logs on the fire. "In his journal, Dabbler drew a picture of a similar creature that attacked him during the night," he said. "Six legs, large abdomen, elbowed antennae."

"Formicidae, hymenoptera," said Dot. "A black ant."

"An ant?" said Bitty. "But don't ants live in colonies as we do?"

"And don't they like sweet stuff?" said Nano, eyeing his bottle of lemonade.

"Black ants are harmless to us humans," said Speck. "But who knows if a behemoth ant would see us as human?"

"What about the rubber brick?" asked Dot. "Can we move it?"

Speck shook his head. "It's over two centimeters wide." He massaged Dot's leg. "But we found a water supply to fill our bottles."

“Water? Down here?” said Nano.

“Faith keeps a plastic water bottle in her desk,” said Grandpa Grain.

“But how did you get the lid off?” Bitty asked.

“Remember your school science, Bit,” said her grandfather. “It’s chilly down here. That means that water vapor in the air will condense on a warmer surface. We found dewdrops as big as beach ball on the outside of the bottle.”

At that moment, a blazing light spread across the purple ground. The Pixels shielded their eyes. The southern sky flickered as two blurry Shadows swayed back and forth. Deep roars rumbled through the air.

“Bit, the sound muffler,” said Grandpa Grain. “What are gogs doing here at this hour?”

Bitty grabbed the wooden trumpet and held it to her ear. Another roar rattled the ground.

“Faith is calling to us again,” she said. “Hello, teeny-people? Where are you?”

“Teeny-people,” Nano muttered.

“Shh! Shh!” said Bitty. “Now the other gog is talking. It’s Fulton, and...and he’s threatening to turn this entire desk upside down.”

Chapter Thirteen

In which Fulton looks inside the desk and Dr. Carbo visits



I“don’t see anything,” said Fulton Benson. He grabbed the bottom of Faith’s desk with both hands. “Upsadaisy.”

“No, Fulton,” Faith cried. “Wait. Just wait. It’s best to use the magnifying glass. I’ll find them.”

Frantically, Faith moved the plastic lens around the inside of her desk. “Hello? Hello, teeny-people,” she called out. “I need to find you. Trust me. Show me where you are.” She turned toward Fulton. “Things are all jumbled around in here since you shook it.”

Fulton frowned. “Just how small are these people supposed to be?”

Faith pushed back her eyeglasses. “As I told you, about the size of a period. They were living in my pencil sharpener, but I saw them climb down the slot in my desktop. They’re here, Fulton. I know they are.”

“*Pah!*” Fulton grabbed the bottom of the desk again.

“Upsadaisy.”

Faith gripped his arm. “Ten minutes,” she pleaded. “Give me ten minutes to find them. They’re in here. An entire family. You wouldn’t want to hurt an entire family would you? An entire family of sand people?”

Fulton stared at the girl. His face softened. “OK, Faithy, I’ll go to the computer for ten minutes. If you don’t show me these sand people by then, it’s bottoms-up for your desk.”

While Fulton walked to the computer in the rear of the classroom, Faith resumed her search. Back and forth, up and down, she steered the magnifying glass.

“Hello, teeny-people. This is an extreme emergency,” she said. “If you hear me, give a signal; show me where you are.”

Faith raised her math book. She removed wads of paper and a paperback book. She lifted out her plastic water bottle and moved her pack of scented felt markers to one side.”

“Five minutes, Faithy,” Fulton called out.

Faith stuck her head far into the desk. “Where are you, teeny-people? Make some noise. Shine your headlights.”

Faith paused. What had she smelled? She took a long sniff. Yes, the odor of wood smoke came from her eyeglass case.

“My purple case smells like a campfire.”

“Time’s up, Faithy,” Fulton called out. “Ready or not, here I come.”

Fulton stomped toward Faith’s desk.

“Wait,” Faith said. “If you tip over my desk, you’ll hurt them. You’ll hurt the whole family. Why don’t you look? Please, Fulton.

They're there. Five of them. And I think they built a fire. Get a magnifying glass and look yourself."

"*Pah!*" went Fulton. Still, he grabbed a plastic lens off the bookshelf and knelt by Faith's desk. "Tell me again what am I looking for exactly?" he said.

Faith opened the desktop wider. "Itty-bitty people. They're wearing itty-bitty hiking clothes, carrying itty-bitty backpacks, and have itty-bitty lights on their foreheads."

Fulton leaned forward with the lens to his eye. "This is the dumbest thing I've ever done," he said. "Man, what a mess. Don't you ever clean out your desk?" He was silent a moment. "*Pah!* There are even ants in here. Your desk has ants. I bet those are what you thought were people."

"Search by my eyeglass case," said Faith. "Do you smell smoke?"

Fulton moved the magnifying lens to the right. "I only smell this dirty white sock," he said. "But, hey, I like this eraser with the whale picture on it."

"Keep looking, Fulton," said Faith. "And leave my eraser alone."

"No sand people here, Faithy" said Fulton. "What a waste of time, and in payment for that wasted time, you owe me one whale eraser."

Fulton reached for the eraser. But before his hand touched the small rubber thing, it froze. What was that twinkle? A glint of light came from behind the eraser. He held up the magnifying glass.

“Pah!”

The boy fell backward, banging his head on the desktop.

“Pah!” he repeated.

“Did you see them, Fulton?” said Faith. “Where are they?”

Fulton pointed. “Th...there,” he said. “They’re there.”

“Talk softly,” Faith said. “Our voices must sound like thunder to them.”

The two fourth-graders leaned into the desk at the same time, nearly knocking heads. They held their hand lenses up to the whale eraser. All five tiny explorers were present. The woman lay beside the eraser and the others sat around a campfire. The old man held a pistol and the man wielded a machete. The girl was again holding the wooden trumpet to her ear.

“Don't breathe, Fulton,” Faith whispered. “It’s like a windstorm to them.”

Fulton batted some hair off his face. “This is unbelievable,” he said. “Grandfather Benson has told me the sand people myths many times. But they’re not myths; they’re real. This is unbelievable!”

Faith brought the lens into her desk again. “So why are they staying by my eraser. They’re usually hiking.”

Fulton moved his lens back and forth for a better focus. “See the woman,” he said. “Her leg is trapped under the eraser.”

Faith pushed Fulton out of the way. “It must have fallen on her when you shook my desk,” she said.

“I didn’t know,” said Fulton. “We gotta help her. We gotta lift the eraser.”

“How?” Faith asked. She glanced at Fulton’s chubby hands. “Not with your fat fingers and my bad eyes. The slightest jiggle could crush the woman.”

Fulton leaped to the shelf under the window. He returned holding a pair of tweezers from the science tray.

“I’ll use these,” he said. He squeezed the tweezers twice. Click! Click! “I use tweezers at home, making model airplanes.”

Faith stared at Fulton impressed. “I’ll hold the lid open,” she said. She checked her eyeglass case again. “Just be careful. The woman is sitting up. She doesn’t appear hurt.”

Click! Click! “I’m ready.”

Holding the tool in one hand and the magnifying glass in the other, Fulton leaned into the desk. Like a brain surgeon doing a delicate operation, he pinched the eraser. He paused then lifted. He let out his breath and fell backward.

Faith rechecked the scene. “You did it, Fulton,” she said. “The teeny woman is OK. The others are helping her to her feet. She’s walking.”

At that moment, a voice came from the classroom doorway.

“What are you two doing in here?”

Dr. Carbo, the science teacher, stood there. A cordless vacuum cleaner was tucked under his arm. Peering over his rimless glass, he scowled at Faith and Fulton.

“School’s over,” he said. “You two should be on your way home or in After School Club.”

Slowly Faith closed her desk. “We’re going, Dr. Carbo,” she said. “My mom’s picking me up for an eye doctor’s appointment.”

The science teacher pointed his vacuum cleaner toward the door. “So go,” he said.

The two students exchanged nods and stood. Without a word, they had an agreement. The five tiny people inside Faith’s desk would remain a secret. Faith snatched the whale eraser off the floor and handed it to Fulton. Together, they grabbed their backpacks from their seatbacks and left the room.

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Meanwhile, Dr. Carbo remained standing by Faith’s desk. He eyed the magnifying glass that Faith had left by the pink pencil sharpener. He kicked the tweezers that Fulton had dropped on the floor.

Tugging on his black goatee, he spoke to the desktop. “Greetings, Pixels. I know some of you tiny mites have returned to this classroom.”

The science teacher reached into his coat pocket. He removed a tiny airplane, no bigger than a housefly, and held it in the palm of his hand. The miniature plane had a cracked wing. On the side were words and a symbol:

Pixel Corps of Discovery Scientific Expedition



“Look what I found on the floor by Miss Singer’s desk,” Dr. Carbo said. “And the magnifying lens and tweezers are proof. It’s been ten years, but I remember the name Pixel well. Five seats in the plane, so five of you mites must have come this time.” The science teacher returned the tiny plane to his pocket and swiped

his single strand of black hair across his head. “My what a superb specimen that last Pixel was. Hearty and full of fight. My scientific research was going along splendidly, until that vermin escaped from my science lab.” The man knelt on the carpeted floor and switched on the hand-held vacuum. A loud whoosh filled the classroom.

“A poser! A fraud! That’s what the bigwig scientists at the university called me,” he went on. “But that won’t happen this time. Oh, no. This time I’ll show those professors some real research, some mind-boggling data, some Nobel Prize-worthy science.”

The science teacher vacuumed Faith’s chair seat and her desktop. “After I capture all five of you tiny mites, I’ll continue the experiments I began a decade ago,” he said. “I’ll study you Pixels outside and in. I’ll find out what makes you tick.” He looked toward the bookshelf and saw that the rat came was still empty. “No more classroom rodent dissecting for me, Pixels. Soon I’ll have the rarest specimens in the world to work on.”

He vacuumed inside the pink pencil sharpener and pencil groove. “And when I publish my scientific paper, oh, won’t the university scientists be jealous, humbled by my accomplishment, ashamed how they treated me.” He crawled around and around Faith’s desk, giggling with delight. “Now where are you, little Pixels? You can’t escape my vacuum.”

Chapter Fourteen

In which the Pixels take a thrilling slide ride



Whooooooooooooooooooooooooooooosh!

“What’s that sound?” said Bitty Pixel, inserting her earplugs. “It’s coming from below.”

Whooooooooooooooooooooooooooooosh!

Speck Pixel shook his head. “It’s different from the other Noise, more mechanical,” he said. “Let’s push on. I want to get farther down in the desk before the gog-students return in the morning.”

“How’s the leg, Mom?” asked Nano, dousing the fire.

Dot pulled on her backpack. “Fine, fine. But how did I get free? Where did the rubber brick go?”

Grandpa Grain shone his headlamp upward. The beam vanished into blackness. “Perhaps Faith needed to erase something,” he said. “But how she managed to lift that eraser without crushing you, I can’t imagine.”

Bitty slung the sound muffler over her shoulder. “This time I

heard three gog voices,” she said. “Before the sky went dark, Faith and Fulton were talking with the science teacher. I only caught part of his name...Carbo.”

Grandpa Grain spun toward Bitty. He spoke with alarm in his voice that was rare. “Carbo? Did you say the science teacher’s name is Carbo?”

Bitty nodded.

“Then I must be him,” Grandpa Grain said. “Carbo was the name of the gog, the science teacher, who captured my brother Dab.”

Dot looked eastward, from where the sound was now coming. “Is it possible?” she said. “After all these years, could the same mega-person be outside this desk?”

“You were going to tell me about Carbo, Grandpa,” said Bitty. “What did he do to Uncle Dab?”

Grandpa Grain sat on a rubber rock, dazed. As he began to speak, the whooshing sound cut out. “If all gogs are as cruel and inhuman as Carbo, we’re in grave danger,” he said. “After months of exploring the Land of Megas, my brother decided to contact the gog science teacher he’d been listening to through his sound muffler. So he lit a torch to signal him.”

“Makes sense,” said Nano. “After all, Uncle Dab was also a scientist.”

Grandpa Grain scratched his white whiskers. “When Carbo found my brother, he dropped him inside a glass prison. For days, he prodded and poked Dabbler with pins. He took blood samples, bone samples, and DNA samples. He studied him under a super-

sized microscope. He zapped Dab with so many rays that his hair fell out.”

“He tortured him?” said Bitty.

“Not unlike what scientists in the colony used to do before animal testing was banned,” said Dot.

Grandpa Grain nodded. “I doubt Carbo even viewed my brother as a living thing that could suffer and feel pain,” he said. “Only by disguising himself as a decimal point in Carbo’s notebook did Dabbler escape.” He laughed. “My brother wrote in his journal that his escape caused Carbo much grief and humiliation. You see, that science teacher had bragged to other scientists about his important research. But when one of them came to see the research specimen, Dabbler had already vanished.”

The other Pixels laughed, too.

“How come in the folk tales my teacher told us the Upper Poyntz scientists and mega scientists once work together,” said Bitty. “Our scientists roamed the world and taught the megas many things.”

Speck nodded. “UP physicists taught megas how to split atoms and build rockets,” he said. “One colonist told a gog named Einstein that E equals MC^2 . UP chemists showed gogs how to make plastic from oil, and our astronomers proved to them that the sun is just a tiny part of the Milky Way Galaxy which is one of a hundred billion galaxies in our expanding universe.”

“And don’t forget about Modicum Pixel,” said Dot. “According to legends, your great-great grandfather stepped into a mega’s ear to whisper the secret of making pictures with digital code for digital

cameras and digital displays.”

“Dabbler wrote in his journal that, to this day, the dots on gog computer screens are called pixels in Modicum’s honor,” said Grandpa Grain.

“So what happened?” Bitty asked. “When did the friendship between micro and macro scientists end?”

“Upper Poyntz scientists grew alarmed when the megas started using their scientific knowledge to make weapons and chemicals that pollute the earth,” said Speck. “Soon they too stopped traveling far from the colony and forgot that this world of giant giants existed.” He looked upward. “Now let’s push on.”

In single file, the five Pixels took off across the soft purple ground. Within minutes they arrived at the edge of an enormous crater. Standing on the rim of an abrupt drop-off, they peered into the dark hole.

“Bad luck,” said Grandpa Grain. “This is where we found the water bottle with the huge dewdrops on it.”

“Faith must have needed a drink,” said Speck. “I was hoping to refill all our water bottles.”

“From now on we’ll ration our water,” said Dot. “Who knows when we’ll find another supply?”

Nano raised his nose into the air. “But I smell something better than water.” He sniffed again. “Grape juice.”

“And I smell cherries,” said Bitty. “Wouldn’t some fresh fruit be wonderful?”

“Funny, I smell licorice,” said Dot. “The fragrance is coming from the bottom of this crater.”

After another long rope descent, the Pixels stood before to a tall plastic wall. Here the smell of grape, cherry, licorice, along with blueberry, lemon, and orange was strong.

Nano banged the wall with his fist. "It's thin," he said. "We can break through with the ax. All that food! No more trail stew. I even smell chocolate."

Speck handed him the hatchet. "Careful, Nano," he warned. "Perhaps what's beyond that wall isn't what you expect."

Five whacks with the ax were enough to break through the wall. Now the odors were so strong they made the Pixels woozy. A dozen more hits and Nano had chopped a hole big enough for him to crawl through.

"Time to stuff myself," he said. "Yip! Yip! I'll bring back a feast for the whole family."

Nano disappeared into the hole. He emerged a minute later with both hands and arms stained blue. He reeked of blueberry.

"Oh, Nano," said Dot. "What did you do this time?"

"Just as I thought," said Speck. "Scented felt markers, right?"

Nano nodded. He tried wiping off his palms on his pants.

Bitty giggled. "I also had smelly pens in my desk," she said. "Each one smelled like a different flavor."

"The top of the blue marker was missing," Nano said. "I should have looked twice before grabbing the tip."

"Fortunately, the ink is harmless," said Dot, inspecting Nano's arms. "But we can't waste water getting it off."

"You'll have to remain blue for a while, Blue Boy," said Grandpa Grain.

“My blueberry brother,” said Bitty.

Nano kicked the ground as the others laughed. “I was just trying to help,” he said.

Soon the Pixels had shouldered their backpacks and were hiking up another channel. They climbed over a tall silver beam that was perhaps a mega-staple and squeezed around a lumpy gray formation that, given its peppermint smell, was a wad of chewing gum. They rappelled down another crevasse and hiked up another ravine. They descended a long series of white stairs—“The edge of Faith’s notebook,” said Grandpa Grain—and marched through a long tunnel---“We’re inside a straw!” Nano exclaimed. “I have twenty straws from the lunchroom in my desk at school.”--and in this manner, down, over, down over they plunged deeper and deeper into the depths of the desk.

Finally after several hours, the family entered an open space. Their headlamps shone upon six colossal columns, each a different color. With his rock hammer, Grandpa Grain knocked a chunk from a magenta pillar.

“Crayon wax,” he said. “Faith’s crayons box must have spilled.”

Speck aimed his light into a dark corner. “We need a break and this looks like a safe spot,” he said. “Keep an eye out for dewdrops.”

“And jumbo ants,” said Dot.

“And any sign of a nasty science teacher,” said Grandpa Grain.

The Pixels dropped their backpacks, and Dot passed out trail biscuits. While Speck, Dot, Bitty, and Grain rested, Nano explored

the chamber. Hardly he left when his voice echoed around the gallery. “Awe-stupendous! Come quickly!”

The others ran toward the voice. Behind two crayon columns, their headlamp rays struck something dazzling. The entire ground, for centimeters around, sparkled and shimmered in shades of silver and red. As far as they could see, large square mirrors tiled the ground.

Nano stood in the distance. Patterns of pink, red, and white light danced around his body. “Yip! Yip!” he cried. “Look at me! Look at me!”

“We’re dancing on glitter,” said Dot, moving her light across the twinkling ground. “Red and silver gog-glitter.”

“Valentines Day is in two days,” said Bitty. “Faith must have made a card. I wonder who it’s for.”

Grandpa Grain inspected one of the tiles with his hand lens. “You’re correct, Bit,” he said. “This is aluminum. In gog-scale, this square is the size of a glitter fleck.”

After a short rest, the Pixels collected their gear and hiked across the glittering surface. They wore their sun-goggles to guard against the bright reflections. Tink! Tink! went the tiles under their feet. It took an hour to reach the far side. Once there, they entered still another narrow canyon.

Speck checked his GPS unit. “This is no good,” he said. “We need to keep descending.”

Dot pointed toward the top of a gray wall. “Do you see them?” she whispered. “Quivering antennas. Lots of them.”

Speck nodded. “Yes, six mega-ants have been following us for

the past centimeter. Let's make sure our headlamps stay on."

At that moment, Bitty shouted, "Over here!"

She stood farther up the channel. Her light reflected on the end of wide plank of wood. Flat on top, the long wooden board lay at an incline, slanting downward farther than the Pixels could see.

"A super wide slide," Bitty said. "Look how far down it goes."

"A mega-ruler, no doubt," said Grandpa Grain. "I'm guessing the huge circle at the top is a zero."

"But why not use the ruler as a slide?" said Nano. "We can ride down together."

"Because we have no idea where it ends," said Dot. "Or how safe it is."

Grandpa Grain held up his rock hammer. "No problem. We'll rope together as we did on the scissors, and if we start sliding too fast, I'll use the spike of my hammer as a brake."

With all in agreement, the Pixels wrapped the climbing rope around their waists. They sat on the wooden plank, one behind the other, as if on a toboggan. Grandpa Grain was last, holding his rock hammer behind him with the point down.

"Ready, everyone?" shouted Speck, first in line. "One, two, three!"

He pushed off with his hands and began to slide. His rope pulled Dot, who pulled Nano, who pulled Bitty, who pulled Grandpa Grain.

"Yip! Yip!" Nano cried, as he picked up speed.

"Yeowee!" called the others.

Down, down the family went. Faster and faster. Down some

more and faster still. Their headlamp beams wobbled as they laughed and cheered. The wind nipped their cheeks; their cries echoed around them.

Grandpa Grain held the hammer brake at the ready, but never used it. Instead he kept calling, “Go! Go! Go! More speed! More speed!”

Dot kept her eyes closed, while Nano and Bitty held their arms upward as if on a speeding rollercoaster.

Finally, after over a minute, Speck spotted the end of the incline. The wooden plank rested upon a wide white mat.

“Brace yourselves, Pixels,” he said.

The family landed at full tilt in a tangle of rope, backpacks, arms and legs.”

“Awe-stupendous!” cried Nano. “Let’s do it again.”

“Better than any ride at Upper Poyntz Amusement Park,” said Bitty.

“We should never take such chances,” said Dot. “Now, where are we?”

Made of a loosely knit cloth, the white mat stretched out as far as the Pixel’s light beams could reach.

Grandpa Grain examined the material with his hand lens. “It’s gog cotton,” he said. “Bit, what cotton object would a girl have in her school desk?”

“A glove maybe,” Bitty said. “Or a headband.”

“Well, whatever we’re on, it’s a cozy place to camp tonight,” said Speck. “We’ll pitch the tents right here.”

In no time, the Pixels had their campsite set up. They found

enough wooden logs entrapped in the white mat to build a large campfire.

“That should ward off the monster ants,” said Speck.

Dot poured water and dehydrated vegetables into a pot and placed it on the fire. “Let’s try something new tonight,” she said. “Trail stew.”

The family laughed, for they had trail stew every evening.

“I miss pizza,” said Nano. “Pizza with pepperoni.”

“And I miss root beer floats,” said Bitty.

“I could use a thick, juicy steak right now,” said Grandpa Grain.

“Be thankful we have this dry food,” said Speck. He read their position on his GPS unit. “We descended nearly eight centimeters today, but we still have a long way to reach the bottom.”

Bitty leaned against a rubber rock, recording data in her logbook. “Even then, we can’t be sure there’s a hole in this desk for us to leave,” she said.

“And trail stew is better than what Dab Pixel ended up eating in the Land of Megs,” said Grandpa Grain. “He described one dinner of roasted ant antennae.

Nano sniffed his hands. “Ahhh! Thank goodness, I can still smell blueberry,” he said.

Chapter Fifteen

In which Faith and Fulton arrive at school early



Careful! Careful, Faith!” Fulton Benson said. “Open it slowly and don’t move a thing.”

Faith Singer lifted her desktop. She picked up the magnifying glass and began searching for the tiny family.

“Good morning, teeny people,” she called out. “It’s me again, Faith. I’m here with Fulton. Hello? Hello?”

“Be careful where you focus that lens,” said Fulton. “You could burn the little guys.”

He stuck his head into the desk. “Hi, everybody,” he said. “I brought some stuff for you today.”

Fulton and Faith had arrived in the classroom forty minutes before the start of school. They were alone. Today Faith wore new eyeglasses with blue frames. A beige patch covered her right eye, and she was grateful that Fulton hadn’t mentioned it.

Fulton’s appearance had also changed. His shiny black hair was combed back, and he wore a large white bead around his neck

on a leather strap.

“What’s that?” Faith asked. “What’s that stone?”

The boy held out the stone for Faith to see. “This is magnesite, an important mineral to the Pomo people,” he said. “Grandfather Benson received it from his father who received it from his father. When I described the tiny people in your desk to my grandfather he became very serious and gave this stone to me. For the first time, he invited me into the rancheria sweathouse to tell the other men what I’d seen.”

“What else did your grandfather say?” asked Faith. “What did he tell you about the place where the Pixels come from?”

Fulton flipped the stone around. “See the carving on back. It’s a ring carved with six marks on it. My grandfather said the marks represent the six colonies of sand people that formed the Circle.”

“Wasn’t the Circle believed to be near Point Arena?” Faith asked.

“Actually the ring of sand people villages stood in a field right where our school playground is today,” said Fulton.

Faith rubbed the patch over her eye. “I thought this playground was built on scared Indian ground haunted by Pomo spirits.”

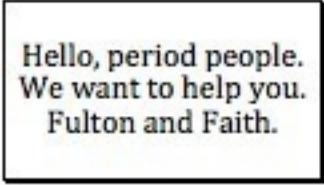
Fulton laughed. “My grandfather said that was just a story that my Pomo ancestors made up to keep the white settlers away from the field. The Circle broke apart around 1840, and the Pomo people lost contact with the sand people soon after that.”

From his sweatshirt pouch, Fulton removed ten white cards

the size of postage stamps. Each card had words printed on it in tiny writing.

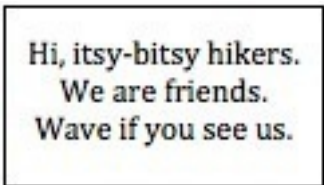
“Mini signs,” he explained. “I made them on my home computer, using the smallest-sized font. I’m gonna place them around your desk for the period people to read.”

Faith was about to say what a dumb idea that was, until she held two cards to her unpatched eye and read them.



Hello, period people.
We want to help you.
Fulton and Faith.

And



Hi, itsy-bitsy hikers.
We are friends.
Wave if you see us.

“These are brilliant, Fulton,” she said. “They’re like miniature billboards. The teeny people should be able to read them, at least from a distance.”

Careful not to bump anything, Fulton placed the cards around the inside of Faith’s desk. He stuck one by her pack of scented marker pens, one at the end of her ruler, and one by the toe of her white sock.

“Put some near the bottom,” Faith said. “I think they’re heading downward.”

Fulton paused. “*Pah!* What’s this?” he said. “A glittery

valentine card. Who's your sweetie? Huh?"

"Just be careful where you stick those signs, Fulton," said Faith. "Stand them upright so the little people can read them."

After placing the last card on the desk bottom, Fulton reached into his backpack. He took out a Baggie containing what appeared to be coarse brown sand.

"Now what?" Faith asked.

"Acorn flour, made from ground up acorns."

Faith made a face. "What for?"

"The Pomo women on the rancheria use this stuff to make acorn mush and acorn soup," said Fulton.

"I mean, why did you bring the crumbs here?"

"I'm gonna sprinkle some around your desk. Faithy. The mini-mini guys are probably hungry by now. Acorn flour tastes great and it's healthy."

Faith wanted to object, but again she found that the idea made sense.

"As long as the food doesn't attract more ants," she said.

Fulton scattered the acorn bits around the inside of the desk as if he were feeding pigeons. Soon afterward, the classroom lights came on. The two students looked up to see Mrs. Alexander standing in the doorway. She wore a white down coat and a white stocking cap. "Why are you two in here before eight-thirty?" she asked.

Fulton stuffed the Baggie into his pouch, and Faith lowered her desktop.

"I'm doing Dr. Carbo's homework," said Faith.

“I’m helping Faith with her science project,” said Fulton.

The teacher scowled as she walked to her desk. “That’s a first,” she said. “Now out with you both until the bell rings. And Faith, your new glasses look lovely. How long must you wear that patch?”

Faith shrugged and hurried out the door with Fulton at her heels.

Chapter Sixteen

In which the Pixels read signs, and Nano gets stuck



B

ounce! Bounce! Bounce!

Speck Pixel rappelled down a yellow wall. At the bottom of the rope, he joined his family who stood in a wide green valley. Nano leaned against a jagged brown boulder that was twice his height.

“Look, Dad,” he said. “This big rock fell from the sky right before it turned dark.”

Grandpa Grain chipped off a chunk of the boulder and sniffed it. “It’s food, and it smells fresh.”

Nano grabbed the piece and bit into it. “Delicious,” he said. “It tastes like...like...Cheerios.”

Speck began winding up the climbing rope. “Time for breakfast,” he said. “Grain, knock me off a portion.”

The Pixels had broken camp early that morning. They wanted to get off the white mat before Faith arrived. But hardly had they set off when the sky lit up. For over ten minutes, two Shadows swayed in the southern sky, before the

world went black again.

Dot checked her watch. "Fulton and Faith came early this morning," she said. "School started thirty minutes ago.

Grandpa Grain nodded. "So why didn't Faith open her desk at the usual time?"

After finishing their meal, the Pixels hiked westward up the green valley. Not for another half hour did the sky turn bright and Faith's silhouette appear. The air remained silent, so earplugs were unnecessary.

Bitty looked up the valley. In the distance, she spotted a large white wall not visible in the darkness. Five black lines crossed it. She took her binoculars from her backpack and directed them toward the white wall.

"Those lines are words, words small enough for me to read," she said. "The sign says, Hi, teensy-weensy guys. We want to be your friends. Fulton and Faith."

Speck shook his head. "This means the megas are still searching for us."

"And if those gogs keep calling us teensy-weensy they're asking for a fight," said Nano

Bitty swung her binoculars southward. "Wait, there's another sign," she said. "Hello, sand people, if you can see us give a signal."

"Fulton and Faith must have left messages throughout the desk," said Nano.

Grandpa Grain fingered the red rock around his neck. "Curious they called us sand people."

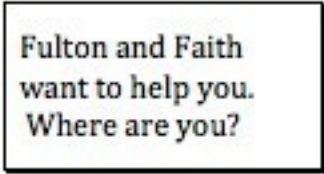
"But why should we trust them?" said Dot. "Let's not forget about the deskquakes and water drops."

"And Carbo is still out there," said Speck. "I agree with Dotty. We should only signal the mega-students in an extreme emergency."

At that moment, the sky returned to black.

Speck switched on his headlamp. "Push on, Pixels," he said. "I hope to camp at the bottom of this desk tonight."

The tiny explorers hiked to the end of the green valley. A short climb down the rope landed them upon a clear plastic surface. Their headlamp rays struck two more brown boulders and another billboard.



Fulton and Faith
want to help you.
Where are you?

"The messages sound sincere," said Bitty.

"And I bet they left the food for us," said Nano. "Let's shoot some signal flares."

The adults shook their heads and kept walking.

Progress upon the plastic surface was slow. The ground was slick and sloped downward at a slight angle. Through the transparent floor, the lights revealed a wide gorge that dropped to an unseen depth.

"Halt!" Speck called after a few millimeters. "Let's rope up and unpack our suction cups."

Grandpa Grain hit the ground with his rock hammer. "I can't figure out what this thing is we're walking upon," he said. "Bit and Nano, what clear plastic object would be found in a fourth-grader's desk?"

"A protractor, maybe" said Bitty. "But usually only older kids have protractors."

Nano, however, had wandered off in search of more billboards.

"There he goes again," said Dot. "Nano, get back here!"

"Careless, boy," called Speck. "Let's stick together on this slick plastic."

But the warnings came too late. Nano was looking upward when he stumbled over a rubber rock. He landed on his belly and slid downhill, feet first.

"Whoa! Whoa!" he called out. "I can't stop! I can't stop."

Down, down, down Nano slid. He spread his arms and legs, but that didn't stop him. He tried digging his toes into the hard surface, but still he kept going. Below him, less than a centimeter away, the clear ground ended at a jagged ledge. Beyond that, it dropped off into darkness.

"Whoa! Whoa! I can't stop! I can't stop!"

The other Pixels watched helplessly as Nano slid closer and closer to the saw-toothed edge. They saw him rise to his knees. He was attempting to stand when he reached the jagged rim. He started to go over but—*Phit!*—he suddenly stopped. He hung on the ledge, arms and legs spread wide, as if frozen in space.

"Nano!" the others cried. The word echoed throughout the desk.

Speck, Dot, Bitty, and Grandpa Grain rushed down to the boy. As they approached the jagged edge, their headlamp rays reflected off a sheet of see-through film. It stretched from the end of the plastic floor to some place far overhead. Nano's back was plastered against it.

"I'm OK," Nano said. "I can't move a muscle, though. Some invisible force is holding me here."

Grandpa Grain lightly touched the film. "Scotch tape," he said. "We must be standing on Faith's tape dispenser."

"That sticky tape saved Nano from falling off," said Speck.

"Nano, are you sure you're not hurt?" asked Dot. "How could you be so careless?"

Nano nodded and shrugged as best he could.

"But how are we going to pull him off?" asked Bitty.

"We can't," said Speck. He drew his machete from his backpack. "We'll have to cut him out."

"It's the only way," said Grandpa Grain, taking out his hunting knife.

Speck and Grandpa Grain went to work. Starting on either side of Nano, they pierced the tape with their blade and sliced around his outline. Dot and Bitty held onto Nano's belt, so he wouldn't fall backward. When the cutting was finished, the boy dropped onto the plastic ground. A thick layer of tape remained stuck to his back.

Nano stood up stiffly, his arms and legs apart like a gingerbread boy. "Get this stuff off me," he said.

"First, we must get off this tape dispenser," said Speck.

For the next hour, the Pixels hiked up the plastic slope. With the tape on his back, Nano waddled more than walked. When the family finally saw solid ground through the transparent floor, they climbed off. They now stood on a shiny blue surface.

Speck and Grandpa Grain took out their blades again.

"Lie down, Tape Boy," said Grandpa Grain. "We have some cleaning up to do."

"This might hurt a little," said Speck. "But that might teach you a lesson. Taking risks without thinking is foolishness."

Nano lay on his belly. Piece by piece, his dad and granddad scraped the tape off his back. The back of his head was the trickiest part, for they had to whack off a good deal of Nano's hair along with the tape.

Meanwhile, Dot spotted a brown cereal boulder.

"Time for lunch," she said. "Come on, Bit, let's go hammer off some

chunks of that thing.”

The women were gone only a minute, when the men heard shouts. “Get away! Shoo! Scat! Scram!”

Speck and Grain ran toward the boulder. Their lights fell upon a mammoth mega-ant. It stood upon the tape dispenser only a few millimeters from Dot and Bitty. The beast’s huge saucer eyes bulged from the sides of an enormous egg-shaped head. Two wriggling antennae stuck out from its forehead, and jaws, like pinchers on a monstrous machine, opened and shut.

Dot waved the rock hammer at the ant. “It must have been following us,” she said.

“It wants our food,” said Bitty.

“Dot, Bit, walk away slowly from that rock,” said Grandpa Grain.

“Very slowly,” said Speck.

Chapter Seventeen

In which we learn about a new age of scientific discovery



“Why were you late?” Fulton Benson asked. “Where were you?”

Faith turned in her seat. Through the thick eyeglass lenses, her unpatched eye appeared red and watery.

“In the office.”

“*Pah!* What j’a do?”

“Punched Theo.”

“Theo? You hit a fifth-grader?”

“He called me a four-eyed pirate.”

“Yeah, but you shouldn’t be picking fights with kids twice your size.”

“Mind your own business.”

“You’re becoming more and more of my business each day,” said Fulton. “I visited the sweathouse again last night. The men talked about the sand people and science and stuff. Most of them

think I'm making the whole thing up. Then my grandfather told a Pomo myth no one had heard before. It was about the future, about a time when our planet will have a crisis, a global disaster that will harm many animals and plants."

"What are you talking about?" asked Faith. "Something like a comet hitting the world or an alien invasion? I've seen movies about those things."

"The myth didn't say what the catastrophe will be, but my grandfather talked about events that are occurring on earth right now, stuff like global warming that's causing arctic ice to melt, animal habitats to change, and the oceans to rise."

"Dr. Carbo talks about global warming all the time," said Faith. "He says it's just a theory that university scientists made up to get attention."

"According to this Pomo legend, to find a solution to this global crisis, scientists from around the world, both big and tiny, must put aside their personal concerns and work together," Fulton went on. "Grandfather Benson said that if what I told him were true, if I did find some sand people, this could signal the start of a whole new era of science, an enlightened age of scientific discovery."

Mrs. Alexander called from the front of the classroom. "Faith, turn around and turn in your homework."

Faith reached into her backpack. Still fuming, she yanked out her science project, but in her haste she ripped the paper.

"Stupid paper," she said.

She flung open her desktop. She found her Scotch tape by her social studies book, and noticed a small black ant standing on it.

“Stupid ant,” she said, flicking the insect away with a finger. Then, still holding open her desktop, she turned toward Fulton again.

“What did he mean by scientists both big and tiny?” she asked. “What did he mean by an enlightened era of scientific discovery?”

“My grandfather said that if sand people really exist, then the six colonies could exist,” said Fulton. “And if the colonies exist, maybe the Circle could be brought together again.”

“I remember your grandfather telling us about the Circle,” said Faith. “Lots of tiny scientists, advanced in medicine and technology, lived there.”

“That’s for sure,” said Fulton. “Scientists from one colony, alone, the one called Kali, discovered nuclear fission, laser beams, and semiconductors used in computers. So imagine what the scientists of all six colonies reunited might discover.”

“Like a solution to global warming,” said Faith.

“That’s what Grandfather Benson spoke about in the sweathouse last night. But the other men laughed at him.”

“Why would they laugh?” said Faith. “The teeny people are right here in my desk. They’re real. The colonies and the Circle could be real, too.”

“Because past reports of sand people sightings have all turned out to be hoaxes,” said Fulton. “These false claims brought great embarrassment to the Pomo people. Ten years ago Dr. Carbo even announced that he had found a micro person.”

“Our science teacher?” asked Faith.

Fulton nodded. "My grandfather knows a scientist, Tom Farr, at the University of California. For years Dr. Farr has searched for a connection between the Pomo Indian myths and actual scientific discoveries. But when he visited our school to verify Dr. Carbo's claim, he found nothing. After that, our science teacher became a butt of jokes among university scientists."

"No wonder Dr. Carbo was interested in my magnifying lens," said Faith.

"Now my grandfather wants me to bring home something that will prove to the sweathouse men that the sand people are real," said Fulton

Mrs. Alexander looked up from her desk, and Faith returned her attention to her ripped science project. She removed the tape dispenser from her desk and started to pull off a piece of tape. Then she froze. What was that by the toothed end of the container?

"A tiny hole," she muttered. Through her land lens she examined the puncture. "It's a itty-bitty hole shaped like a itty-bitty cut-out doll."

Carefully, she tore off piece of tape and turned toward Fulton again.

"You wanted proof?" she whispered. She held out the tape and the magnifying glass. "Here."

With the lens to his eye, Fulton examined the tape. "*Pahl* Now we gotta get alone in this room. We gotta look for the little guys and make sure they're OK."

"But when? I have detention after school."

Once more, the teacher called from her desk. "That's it, you

two. You'll both stay in from recess for talking too much in class."

Faith and Fulton exchanged grins. This was perfect.

...

An hour later, as the rest of the class marched outside, the pair remained in their seats with their heads on their desktops.

From her bent position, Faith looked past the empty rat cage on the shelf and out the classroom window. In the far corner of the playground, the rusty tetherball pole with the deflated yellow ball dangling from its top rose at a slant from the cracked asphalt.

Mrs. Alexander looked up from her desk. "I need to go to the teachers' lounge," she said. "You two are not to leave your seats until the class returns. Understand?"

Faith and Fulton nodded as best they could. This was the moment they had been waiting for. The instant the teacher left, Fulton slipped from his seat and placed the piece of tape with the tiny figure cut out of it carefully in his backpack. Then he knelt by Faith who raised her desktop. Each grabbed a magnifying glass, and began the search.

"I think they're heading downward," said Faith. "I bet their trying to find a way off my desk and a way home."

"We gotta find their colony, and help put the Circle back together again," said Fulton. "Imagine, all that scientific knowledge in those miniscule brains."

"Size is relative, Fulton," said Faith. "There could be two kids a million times our size searching for us right now, but we're the brainier."

Fulton was silent a moment before shouting, "Don't move!" He

fixed his lens on a wad of white tissue. “There they are, Faith. *Pah!* And they’re in the midst of a battle.”

Faith shoved Fulton out of the way. She held her magnifying glass on the tissue.

“Yes, all five teeny people are standing on my Kleenex,” she reported. “And three black ants are trying to climb up to them.” She moved the lens back and forth. “The man is waving an itty-bitty blade and the woman is waving an itty-bitty ax. The rest are shining lights at the insects. How brave!”

Fulton extended his pointer finger and poked it into the desk. “Me to the rescue!” he said. Then he squashed the ants one at a time. “*Pah! Pah! Pah!*”

Faith squeezed next to Fulton. “Good, the teeny people are climbing down from the Kleenex!” she said, holding up the lens. “Now they’re running between my dictionary and social studies book...but that’s no good. It’s a dead end.”

Faith slid the dictionary over. This left a gap between the book and her red recorder case.

Fulton shoved her aside and took over the play-by-play. “The dot people are running past your recorder, a candy corn, a red checker, and a seashell. The boy stopped by one of my acorn crumbs, but now he’s catching up with the others. They’re about to cross your dinosaur stickers.”

“I was wondering where those things were,” said Faith.

For the next quarter-hour, Faith and Fulton watched as the tiny family hiked over the sheet of stickers, slid under a red M&M, climbed down a Pee Chee folder, dashed in and out of a pen cap,

and ran along a seagull feather.

“They’ve gone into the curly wire of my spiral notebook,” Faith said at length.

“Good, I don’t think any ant can fit in there,” said Fulton.

Loud noises at the classroom door signaled the end of recess.

Faith slowly closed her desktop. “See you later, teeny people,” she said.

“So long, sand people,” said Fulton. “You take care in there.”

Chapter Eighteen

In which the Pixels reach the desk bottom



fter the sky returned to darkness, the five Pixels turned on their headlamps. Their lights reflected off a series of tall silver rings, lined up side by side.

“Where are we?” asked Speck, still panting hard.

Grandpa Grain studied a shiny beam that curved high overhead. “My guess is that we’re inside the wire of a spiral notebook,” he said

Dot removed her backpack. “So what happened back there?” she asked.

“Something big came down and flattened the mega-ants,” said Nano.

“And walls were moving and splitting apart,” said Bitty.

Speck wiped his neck with a bandana. “Faith and Fulton had something to do with that, I’m certain.”

“They were either trying to help us or squash us, too,” said

Grandpa Grain.

After washing down trail biscuits with a small ration of water, the explorers started off again. They hiked from under the silver rings, and followed the row of loops southward. After a dozen rings, they arrived at another cliff. A long climb down brought them to a short tunnel, and through the tunnel they found another ledge.

Bitty was the first one down this time. She was gone only a minute before her excited voice squawked on the walkie-talkie. "I've landed on cool metal ground! This might be it!"

The others rappelled down the rope in quick order. The ground they stood upon was flat, gray, and much cooler than other surfaces. Kneeling, Grandpa Grain beat upon the ground with his hammer. A tinny ring replied.

"Thin steel," he said. "Yes, Pixels, I think we made it! We have reached the bottom of the desk!"

Speck checked his GPS unit. "The center of the desk, the place where the clean-out hole will most likely be, is six point seven centimeters west of here," he said.

"We should be at the hole by dinnertime," said Dot.

"If there is a hole," said Nano.

"And if the hole is not covered by a book or folder" said Bitty.

"Push on," said Speck.

The Pixels filed up a narrow slot that led westward. This deep in the desk the air was humid and smelled of sour milk. The sound of the hiker's step--*tink, tink, tink*—echoed far overhead. Here, many more dust bushes, rubber rocks, and chunks of curly wood blocked the path, and often the family had to stop and clear the

debris.

After two hours, Speck rechecked his bearings on the GPS. “We’re almost there. This channel should take us directly to the hole.”

But hardly had the explorers set out again, when they found the passageway blocked again. This time, a red column, a crayon, was wedged tightly between the two sides of the ravine. Both faces, sheer multi-colored layers, rose several centimeters above the metal ground.

“We have no choice but to climb,” said Speck, unraveling the climbing rope.

Bitty strapped on her harness. “I bet these walls are the stacks of papers and handouts Faith never finished or forgot to take home,” she said.

“That’s what ended up at the bottom of my school desk,” said Nano.

With the climbing rope joining them at the waist, the Pixels started the ascent. Speck went first. He climbed onto a narrow red ledge and braced himself against the cliff. One by one, the others scrambled up to him. Then Speck climbed up to a green ledge, and the family repeated the routine. In this fashion, millimeter by millimeter, page by page, they mounted the steep precipice.

Halfway up, however, Dot’s foot slipped. She fell backward, shouting, “Falling! Falling!”

At once, Speck plastered himself against the wall. Dot dropped, but only a few millimeters before the rope stopped her. She swung inward and regained her footing.

“I’m OK!” she called out, and the Pixels resumed their climb.

Not for another hour did Speck push himself over the crest of the cliff. He belayed the rope until Dot, Nano, Bitty, and Grandpa Grain stood with him. From this height, they could see beyond the red crayon column. Their view was of a vast open space, and in the middle, a crescent of light beamed up from the desk bottom.

“Behold!” said Grandpa Grain. “The hole in the center of the desk!”

Bitty held her binoculars on the fingernail-shaped opening. “It’s mostly covered, but there’s plenty of room for us to drop through,” she said.

“We have a way out,” said Dot. “We can finally leave this desk.”

After the long climb down, the Pixels approached the bright arch in the metal ground. Enough light came through it for them to turn off their headlamps. Nano lay on his belly and peered over the edge. A fresh, cool breeze blew into his face.

“I can’t see the classroom floor,” he said. “How are we supposed to get down from here? Our climbing rope won’t get us even close to the ground.”

Grandpa Grain threw down his backpack. “That dilemma had been troubling me,” he said. “And so far I have no answer.”

“According to the legends, the sand people floated place to place on huge dandelion seedpods,” said Bitty.

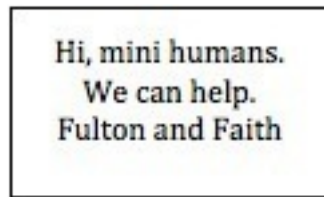
Nano ran up to a large clump of dust. “Well, there’s stuff down here as light and fluffy as seedpods,” he said. He kicked the bushel. “Gog dust!”

Speck looked around. “Yes, there are dust clusters around here,” he said. “We could clump them together with static electricity.”

“And make a big, big dust bunny!” said Bitty.

“A dust airship could work,” said Grandpa Grain. “But we’ll need a basket or box for us stand in.”

Dot pointed to a cardboard sign that leaned against a brown wall. It read:



“Why not cut pieces from that card to build the basket,” she said.

Nano stepped up to a white puddle. “And here’s glue to hold the pieces together.”

“We’ll suspend the basket under the big dust bunny with climbing rope,” said Bitty.

“Sounds like a plan,” said Speck. “So let’s pitch camp here tonight. We’ll start construction on the dust bunny airship right after dinner.”

While Bitty set up the tents, Nano built a fire. Dot prepared a dinner of trail stew mixed with chunks of cereal, and Speck erected the portable weather station to take air samples.

For his part, Grandpa Grain sat on a rubber rock and

designed the airship in his notebook. “We must collect only the fluffiest dust bales,” he said. “A cubic centimeter of dust should give us the correct buoyancy.”

Grandpa Grain was sketching intently, when a dark shadow fell over him.

“Look out, Grandpa!” shouted Nano.

“Behind you!” Bitty cried.

What happened next, happened quickly. As Grandpa Grain turned, something clamped him around his middle. The next thing he knew, he was being lifted upward. He turned his head and looked into a giant black oval—the compound eye of a mega ant. The monstrous insect had snatched him in its jaws.

The man kicked his legs and pounded the pinchers with his fists. “Release me, gigantic ant,” he yelled. “Put me down, you overgrown insect.”

But the ant held firm and stomped off into the darkness with Grandpa still kicking and shouting.

“Grandpa!” Bitty and Nano said together.

“He’s gone!” said Dot. “We must go after him.”

Speck grabbed his machete. “Nano and Dot, you stay here and watch the camp. Bitty come with me.”

“But I can help,” said Nano. “I’ll go, too.”

“No, we can’t take a chance with your carelessness,” said Speck.

Dot handed Bitty some flares from her fanny pack. “Your sister can do it, Nano,” she said.

Nano watched his sister and father run off in the direction the

ant had gone.

“But I can help,” he said. He grabbed his water bottle and hatchet. “I know about ants. I learned about them in second-grade science.”

“No, Nano,” said Dot. “We can’t risk you getting into trouble, too.”

Nano, however, had already left.

“Be careful, Nano!” his mother called after him. “Don’t do anything foolish!”

Almost in tears, Dot looked toward the cardboard sign that stood nearby. “In the ancient times, the sand people counted on the gogs for help,” she said. She picked up a large gray rod, a pencil tip, off the ground. “It’s time to trust Fulton and Faith.”

Chapter Nineteen

In which Fulton and Faith receive a signal



Fulton Benson held up his squirt bottle. “The period people must be thirsty by now,” he said. “I’ll leave them drop of water.”

Faith Singer opened her desk. Detention was over, and in fifteen minutes her mother would pick her up.

“Quickly, before someone kicks us out,” she said.

Peering through their round lenses, the two students leaned into the desk. Faith removed some used worksheets and spelling tests.

“Careful, careful,” said Fulton.

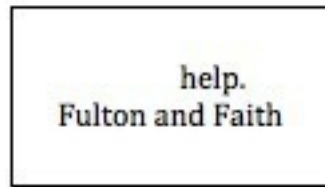
“I’ve almost reached the bottom,” Faith said.

As she spoke, something flashed under a half-finished math sheet. When she raised the paper, she spotted movement by the clean-out hole in the desk bottom.

“There’s the teeny woman!” she said. She pushed aside a library book that was blocking the hole. “See, they’ve set up their itty-bitty tents and have built an itty-bitty campfire.”

Fulton bumped Faith out of the way. “The woman is waving to us,” he said. “*Pah!* She just shot a firework out of a pistol.”

“That’s not a firework; it’s an emergency signal flair,” said Faith, squirming forward. “And look, the message on your card has changed.”



Together, the pair trained their lenses on the small figure. They saw her hold the wooden trumpet to her ear.

“Hello? Hello?” said Faith. “Do you hear us?”

The woman pointed to the sign and nodded.

“Good, I gotta million questions to ask you?” said Fulton.

“What is your name? Where is your colony? Are you a scientist? Where did you buy your tiny clothes and camping gear?”

“Look, the period lady picked up a pencil point,” said Faith. “She’s writing something on your card. Tiny numbers and letters. You read it, Fulton, your eyes are better.”

Fulton leaned farther in with the hand lens. “It says due west eighty-nine point seven meters.”

“That’s a direction,” said Faith. “You asked the woman where’s her home.” She looked out the classroom window. “West, about ninety meters? That’s about where the crooked tetherball pole stands. Could the Kali colony be inside the tetherball pole?”

“The woman just spelled another word,” said Fulton. “P...I...X...E...L... Pixel.”

“Pixel? Pixel?” said Faith. “That must be the family’s name... Pixel.”

“I guess,” said Fulton. “Pixels are the small dots on a digital display. The name fits. Pixels.”

Faith leaned into the desk. “Mrs. Pixel?” she said. “Do you need our help?”

Again the woman nodded. This time she pointed toward the back of Faith’s desk.

“Something’s the matter with the other Pixels,” said Fulton. “We gotta find them.”

The two fourth-graders pulled papers and textbooks from the desk. Out came folders, wads of paper, crayons, Popsicle sticks, two quarters, Legos, candy wrappers, and a starfish. When the desk was nearly empty, they leaned into it again. Their two magnifying lenses nearly touched the desk bottom.

“I see them!” said Fulton. “The dot man and girl! They’re running toward a goldfish cracker.” He moved his lens. “An ant is standing there! *Pah!* And it has the old man in its mouth. Gross! But he seems OK. At least his arms and legs are moving. What’ll we do? I can’t smash the ant without harming the man.”

Faith shoved Fulton out of the way and held up her lens. “The man and blond girl have stopped in front of the ant. Look at them. The man’s waving a sword and the girl just lit a flare. But where’s the boy? I can’t see the itty-bitty boy.”

Fulton squeezed against Faith. He held his lens next to hers.

“There he is,” he said. “He’s on top of the goldfish cracker. Look, he’s holding a tiny ax. What’s he going to do?... He’s running across the fish’s tail toward the ant...Oh, this should be good...Now the man and girl are right before the ant, and the little boy is sneaking up behind it. This will be good. Those Pixels sure are brave.”

At that moment, a voice came from behind the two students. “Pixels? What did you say about Pixels?”

Faith and Fulton fell backward. Both bumped their heads on the underside of the desktop.

Dr. Carbo stood there. He wore his white lab coat and held the cordless vacuum cleaner. With his large belly pressing against the back of Faith’s chair, the science teacher was trying to peer into Faith’s desk. “Pixels,” he repeated. “That’s what I heard you say. What do you know about Pixels?”

Fulton shrugged his hefty shoulders. “Pixels?” he said. “You mean, like on a computer screen?”

“I know nothing about Pixels,” Faith said.

Dr. Carbo bent down farther so that Fulton and Faith could smell his coffee breath. He craned his neck right and left. “So what are those magnifying glasses for? Hmm? You must be looking at something small, something wee-tiny in that desk. Hmm?”

Faith began loading things back into her desk, careful to avoid the area near the cleanout hole.

“I was just cleaning out my desk,” she said.

“It was about time,” said Fulton

Slowly Faith closed the lid. Before she brought it down all the

way, however, she slipped an eraser under the front edge. This left a crack between the desktop and desk.

Fulton nodded to show that he understood. The Pixels would need the extra light in their battle with the ant.

“We must go, Dr. Carbo,” he said.

“To After School Club after school,” said Fait.

Then, without another look toward the science teacher, the two students stood and hurried from the room.

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After Faith and Fulton had left, Dr. Carbo studied Faith’s desktop. “So Pixels, I now know where you’re hiding,” he said. “And early tomorrow morning, when no one else is here, I’ll suck you out.” He tapped the desktop with the vacuum nozzle. “A poser! A fraud! That’s what those scientists in the ivy-covered towers called me. Well, not anymore. Tomorrow I’ll have five new micro specimens to examine. I’ve already sent e-mails to the science profs to soon expect a major scientific announcement from Dr. Quentin K. Carbo. Yes, Pixels, my future begins tomorrow. You can’t escape my vacuum.”

Chapter Twenty

In which Nano proves himself, and the Pixels leave the desk



Put me down, nasty ant,” cried Grandpa Grain Pixel. He twisted his body; he kicked his legs, but still the ant held him firmly in its pinchers. “Let me go, you outsized insect!”

Speck and Bitty stood before the monstrous creature. Speck flailed his machete and Bitty waved a hissing flare. The sky had grown dim, but still enough light filtered down for them to see the ant. The insect had backed into the bend of a long golden wall, and the only way out was for it to pass the two Pixels.

“Come get me, big bug,” shouted Speck, dodging a swipe of the ant’s hairy front foot. “I’m more tasty than that old man.”

“Here ant! Here boy!” said Bitty, leaping away from a slashing antenna.

At that moment, a small container, a plastic bottle, dropped from the top of the wall. It bounced on the metal floor sending its contents, a pink liquid, splattering in all directions.

To the amazement of both Speck and Bitty, the insect set Grandpa Grain on the ground. Then it turned and began tasting the spilled liquid.

Grandpa Grain scrambled to his feet. "What happened?" he called out.

Speck held up his blade. "Don't know, Grain," he shouted. "But get over here before that beast returns its attention to you."

Bitty pointed to the top of the golden wall. "Look up there!" she said. "It's Nano! He's standing above the ant, holding the hatchet. What's he going to do?"

"Foolish, boy," said Speck. "He's going to make that ant even angrier."

Meanwhile, on top of the wall, Nano looked down upon the shiny black creature ten millimeters below him. The ant was still slurping the pink lemonade.

"So far, so good," he said. He looked out and saw his father, sister, and grandfather watching him. "I must make the next part count."

Taking aim at the ant's bulbous abdomen, he raised the hatchet. "Yip! Yip! Yip!" he shouted and leaped from the wall. He landed on the ant's back, bringing the ax down full force onto its outer shell. The blade sunk in a short ways, but that was enough. The enormous ant trembled.

"Yip! Yip! Yip!" Nano repeated, as he slid to the floor.

Hairy feet and wriggling black legs were everywhere. The ant's vast underside spun above him. One moment Nano saw snapping jaws and whipping antennae and the next nothing. The ant had

run away.

The boy rose to his feet. He brushed off his jeans and licked his cheesy fingers. His father, sister, and grandfather stood a short distance away. Their appearance, pale and shaken, surprised him.

"I know about ants," Nano said, with a shrug. He licked his fingers some more. "From school. I know they like sweet stuff such as lemonade, and I know the abdomen is the softest part of its exoskeleton." He shrugged again. "I know about ants."

Bitty ran up to her brother. "Nano, that was so brave." She gave him a hug. "I could never have done what you just did. That took such courage."

"You saved my life, young man," said Grandpa Grain. "You used your head. That was brilliant."

Speck remained standing there, rubbing the back of his neck. "Brilliant, but risky," he said. Then he nodded. "And risk mixed with knowledge led you to good judgment. Nano, I can never doubt your abilities again." He walked up and hugged his son. "Now let's hurry and see if your mother is all right."

The Pixels ran back to the camp. The hole, now uncovered, was so large that the far horizon was a gray blur. It let in enough light to see the surrounding area clearly.

Dot was standing by Fulton's card, holding the ear trumpet. The giant pencil tip lay at her feet.

"Faith and Fulton were here," she said. "I also heard Carbo talking. He's returning in the morning to look for us."

Speck checked his watch. "That means we must start building our dust-ball airship at once," he said. "We have roughly twelve

hours to complete it and fly out of this desk.”

Nano and Bitty raced off to gather bales of dust, and the adults approached the white card. With the pencil tip, Grandpa Grain outlined the sections of a shoebox shaped compartment on the bottom corner.

After each side was drawn, Speck and Dot cut them out with the machete and camp saw. Each section had tabs on the end that they bent and glued to the next piece. When the box-shaped gondola was finished, they cut out a long propeller and rigged it to the box with a crank attached.

“That will give us some control over the craft,” said Speck.

Grandpa Grain nodded and said, “We’ll encounter during our descent to the floor?”

Meanwhile, Bitty and Nano collected armloads of dust. They rubbed each cluster on a wool sweater until they crackled with static electricity. One by one, they joined the fluffy balls together.

“Give them a good charge,” said Speck. “We don’t want the dust bundles coming apart in mid-flight.”

The cutting, gluing, and dust gathering took many hours. As the light from the hole grew dim, the Pixels worked by the beams of their headlamps. When the dust ball was big enough, Speck cut the climbing rope into pieces and secured the gondola to it.

With the morning light, the Pixels pushed the completed craft to the edge of the hole. The static dust charge made their hair stand on end.

“I have a name for our airship,” said Bitty. “Let’s call it Dust Bunny One”

“It’s a well-built craft,” said Grandpa Grain. “It should take us slowly and safely to the classroom floor.”

“But then what?” asked Dot. “What will we do after we land?”

Speck patted Queen Iota’s letter under his shirt. “Then we’ll continue searching for East Poyntz Colony,” he said. “Our mission is critical. Though we can presume that mega cars and factories are the source of the surplus CO₂ in the air, East Poyntz scientist might know how to reduce this heat-trapping gas and slow down the warming. The fate of our colony is at stake.”

Dot nodded. “It’s seven-thirty,” she said. “We have time for breakfast before we launch.”

Hardly had the Pixels begun eating their trail biscuits, however, when the sky lit up. A deep roar echoed throughout the desk.

“Carbo,” said Nano.

Bitty held the wooden trumpet to her ear. “He’s calling our name...Pixels...Pixels. He said something about a vacuum.”

At that moment, the same sound from yesterday resounded throughout the desk.

Whooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooosh!

Only today it was much louder.

Whooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooosh!

The Pixels watched as bits of paper and clumps of dirt around them flew upward.

“Carbo must have a vacuum cleaner,” Grandpa Grain shouted above the din. “He’s trying to suck us up.”

“Everyone grab your gear,” said Speck. “It’s take-off time.”

Lugging their backpacks, the Pixels climbed into the airship gondola. Grandpa Grain, who was the pilot, took hold of the propeller crank.

Speck handed Nano his GPS unit. “Nano, you be the navigator,” he said. “We need a dependable guide.”

Bitty held up her binoculars. “And I’ll be the spotter,” she said. She turned the binoculars around. “If I look through the lenses this way, big things look smaller.”

By the time the Pixels were settled, the sucking sound was deafening. Larger bits of debris--eraser crumbs, paper bits, and staples—rocketed upward.

“Carbo’s getting closer!” Grandpa Grain shouted.

“Get set to launch!” called Speck.

The gondola was balanced on the lip of the hole, so that the slightest shift in weight would send it over. The plunging box would pull the giant ball of dust after it.

Speck stood in the middle of the compartment. “Ready, Pixels,” he called out. “Ten, nine, eight, seven...”

He stepped toward the hole. “Five, four, three, two, one...”

The box tipped. But instead of sliding out of the desk, it rose. The entire airship--the dust cluster and gondola holding the Pixels--hovered above the clean-out hole.

“Suction!” said Speck. “Carbo’s vacuum has sucked up Dust Bunny One.”

Then luck struck. Fulton’s white card that lay near the hole flew upward. In the next instant, the *whoosh!* cut out, and the airship dropped. It plunged straight through the hole. The gondola

swung wildly, but the large dust cluster caught the air and floated gracefully downward.

Grandpa Grain turned the propeller crank. "We're free of the desk," he said. "This baby is flying!"

"That card must have blocked Carbo's vacuum nozzle," said Speck. "Long enough to release us."

The Pixels' felt their stomachs drop. Wind whistled in the Pixels' ears. Blurry objects loomed all around them.

"Awe-stupendous!" shouted Nano.

"Bye-bye, bad science teacher!" said Bitty. "Bye-bye, desk!"

Nano checked the GPS. "Altitude...fifty centimeters above the classroom floor," he said. "And we're falling fast."

Grandpa Grain turned the propeller, and the craft sped forward.

Bitty peered into her backward binoculars. "Look out, Grandpa! A column dead ahead."

"The desk leg!" Speck cried. "Lean right, Pixels."

Together, the family leaned and the airship turned a few degrees to the right. It brushed the column, knocking off several clumps of dust, but the craft kept coasting.

"Altitude...thirty centimeters," Nano announced.

At the same time, a gust of wind swept under Dust Bunny One. The Pixels' bellies heaved as the airship rose. Back and forth, back and forth the gondola swung.

"Hold on, everyone," said Speck. "The ride will be longer than planned."

"We're climbing fast," Nano said. "Thirty-five

centimeters...forty centimeters.”

“Another desk leg, Grandpa!” Bitty called. “No, it too wide. That Carbo’s leg!”

Grandpa Grain cranked the propeller faster. “Lean left, Pixels,” he commanded.

The Pixels leaned and the airship banked again. The family watched as two tall shadows appeared on either side of them, and quickly vanished.

“We made it!” said Bitty. “We flew through Carbo’s legs.”

“We’ve leveled off at sixty centimeters,” said Nano. “Flying due west.”

“But we’re not slowing down,” said Speck. “Perhaps Dust Bunny One floats too well.”

“Look ahead!” shouted Dot. “It’s all blurry. The mega-world appears to end!”

“That’s the classroom wall!” Speck cried.

“But I see a place to land!” said Bitty. “It’s like a ledge, a shelf maybe! Straight on!”

Grandpa Grain stopped the propeller. “I see it. Brace yourselves, Pixels. The landing will be rough.”

The sky went dark. The cardboard gondola bumped hard. The propeller broke off, and dust flew everywhere. The Pixels heard the sound of scraping, banging, and things ripping apart, until finally the dust-bunny airship came to a stop.

Chapter Twenty-One

In which Faith and Fulton find the Pixels gone



Dr. Carbo stood in the front of the room. “Time for science, class,” he said. “Take out your science books. Today we’ll read about food webs.”

Faith lifted her desktop. The inside of her desk was a mess, the condition she had found it that morning. She grabbed her science book and closed the lid.

“Dr. Carbo was in my desk, I’m sure of it,” she said over her shoulder. “Yesterday he had that Dust Buster.”

Fulton looked toward the front of the room. The science teacher was drawing a web-like diagram on the whiteboard.

“Any sign of the little guys?” he asked.

Faith shook her head.

“Then he must have them,” said Fulton. “He sucked them out of your desk. Where else could the dot people be?”

“What happened at the rancheria last night?” Faith asked.

“I showed the piece of tape to Grandfather Benson,” said

Fulton. "He said he'd show it to the men in the sweathouse, but he doesn't think that tiny cut-out figure is enough proof to convince them that the sand people are real. Everyone fears another hoax."

At this point, the science teacher faced the class. "A food web is a network of connections between organisms...both high level and low level...in an ecosystem," he said. He eyed Faith while he talked. "Yes, science is full of wonders, class. Big wonders and small wonders. Now turn to page eighty-four."

Faith turned her head. "I wonder what he wants the Pixels for," she whispered. "What's he going to do with them?"

Fulton leaned forward. The white rock swung from his neck. "I fear the worst," he said. "Remember all the classroom pets that have disappeared from the school."

Faith nodded. "I heard squeaks coming from Dr. Carbo's lab after Gili went missing."

"So did I. Something tells me our science teacher took those pets. Something tells me he uses them for experimenting and stuff."

"And you think he might do the same thing with the Pixels?" said Faith. "Do tests on them?"

"Yes, I do," said Fulton. "Our science teacher doesn't care about helping the Pixels. He's out for his own good. He's out to prove himself to other scientists."

As Fulton spoke, Faith's eyes fell upon the floor by her feet. One of Fulton's postage-stamp sized cards lay there. She picked it up and held it to her unpatched eye. It was the card that had stood by the clean-out hole, the one Mrs. Pixel changed to ask for help.

Through her magnifying glass, she reread the minuscule words on the card: *Pixels 89.7 meters due west*. As he gaze wandered downward, she discovered something else. In the lower corner, tiny shapes--five rectangles and a propeller--had been cut out.

She spun toward Fulton, beaming. "Dr. Carbo didn't capture the Pixels."

She showed him the card.

Fulton's broad face brightened. "*Pah!* The little guys built an airplane or something and flew out of your desk."

Faith and Fulton looked out the classroom window and onto the playground. They both marveled that an entire colony of sand people could be living somewhere near the crooked tetherball pole. They both had the same thought.

We must find the Pixels. We must locate their colony and the five other sand people colonies.

Faith pushed back her thick-lensed eyeglasses. "We'll reunite the Circle," she said.

Fulton punched Faith's shoulder. "This is big, Faith," he said. "We can begin a new era of scientific discovery."

"Yes, big," said Faith.