

Piers Anthony
Pandora Park



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Chapter 1:

Magic Path

“Mom, I’m eleven years old,” Mark protested. “I’m not a child any more. This is a kindergarten playground.”

Her mouth formed a wry smile. “Consider it a challenge. I’ll pick you up here in one hour; set your watch. Don’t leave the park.”

He didn’t argue; that would merely provoke the standard lecture about responsibility. He set the bezel on his watch and obediently entered the mall park.

Mark was bored already. He knew from experience that Mom would use every minute of that hour, efficiently shopping in the mall. She was a well organized woman. So she was parking him here, to be out of her hair. He gazed at the slides, see-saws, swings, and climbing bars. Kid stuff. If only they’d had a good game terminal where he could go online for some real adventure!

He walked to a prominent statue with a plaque. It was a life-size model of a rather pretty girl about his age, holding an open box. Not that her appearance made any difference; even if she had been real, his folks said that he was too young to date. Maybe he was, but it still bothered him.

He read the plaque: “The first woman, Pandora the All-Gifted, was given a precious box she was never to open until she married. But she was so curious that she opened it anyway, and all the evils of the world flew forth. She shut it immediately, but all that was left inside was Hope.”

Well, now; this was interesting. He read farther: “Thus Pandora’s Box came to mean a present that seems valuable, but is really a curse. Touch the empty box and maybe you will find

Hope.”

What the heck. Mark touched the box.

Something behind the statue caught his eye. It was a paved path curving into the brush. The only thing odd about it was that he could have sworn it hadn't been there before. Was his hope for something interesting to do making him imagine it was magic? Where did it lead?

Mark had always been intrigued by paths. He wanted to know where every path went, just because it was there. He never lost his way on a path.

He circled the statue and followed the path. It wound around like a snake, leading to a forest he hadn't realized was in the mall park. The trees were strange; he was no botanist, but these did not look like any local ones. They had twisted brown trunks and glossy dark green leaves, and some bore exotic fruits. This must be a special greenhouse garden where they kept unusual plants.

Very special. Mark halted beside a tree that bore what looked like chocolate balls. He hesitated barely a moment, then reached out to pick one. He tasted it.

Pure, sweet, milk chocolate.

What kind of tree grew chocolate? Mark knew that chocolate was refined from the cocoa plant, but this was something else.

Oh—it must be an artificial tree, a mock-up, with the chocolate balls stuck on. He might be messing up the show by eating the props.

He walked on. The path seemed endless; he almost wished he had a faster way to follow it, as he wanted to find its end and return before the hour was up. Mom had ways of making him sorry about being late. Maybe a bicycle.

“How about a two-wheeler?” he said aloud, smiling.

Then he saw something not quite the same: a scooter. Not a regular one; this was the adult kind, with large wheels and a front basket. It was just leaning against a tree. There was a sign on it saying LENDING WHEELS. Well, that would do. He would borrow it, and return it to this place when he left.

He took the scooter, set it on the path, put his right foot on it,

and pushed off with his left. He knew he should change feet often, so as not to tire himself.

The scooter rolled forward, maintaining a comfortable speed. This must be a downhill slant, so he could coast for a while. That was fine. He put his left foot on the edge of the platform beside his right and sailed effortlessly along. This must be a long slope.

He crossed an intersection as another path crossed his. He was curious about where that one went, in either direction, but decided to stay on the one he was on. Once he came to its end, he could return and follow the other. Meanwhile the scooter scooted on, needing no pushing.

Something nagged him. He applied the hand brakes, stopped, turned the scooter around, and gave it a push back the way he had come.

It moved along as before, downhill.

This thing was coasting in both directions! Which was of course impossible.

He stopped it, turned it around, and resumed forward motion, coasting. He tried to figure out how it could be doing this. There was no motor; it was a simple machine. There was no wind. So what made it go?

A word came to him: magic. Could this be a magic scooter, or maybe a magic path? Sure, he knew magic didn't exist outside of fantasy books and movies, but this was not the first odd thing about this scene. Maybe it would be easier just to call it magic, until he figured out what was really going on. The magic path.

He crossed another intersection. There was a real network of paths here! He hoped to explore them all, in time. Maybe not today, but there would be other days. Mom shopped here every week.

Funny that there was no one else here. He would have liked to compare notes on this odd region.

Then he heard something. It sounded like, well, someone crying. That was at least the third odd thing.

The sound got louder as he coasted forward. Then he came to a fork in the path. A little way down the right fork was a huddled figure. It looked like a girl, in a blouse and skirt. No, it couldn't be

Pandora! She was just a story.

Mark halted the scooter, leaned it against a tree, and walked up to the girl. She looked to be about his age, or a year or so younger. “Hello,” he said cautiously.

She jumped. She gazed at him with her tear-stained face. She looked Asian and cute. “Oh! I didn’t see you.”

“I’m Mark. I heard you—well, is there something wrong? Any way I can help?”

“I’m Kelsie.” That wasn’t it exactly, but that was the way he heard it. “I’m lost.”

Mark smiled. “As it happens, I’m good at finding my way, and at remembering my route. It is sort of a maze. I can guide you out of here.”

She gazed at him somewhat warily. “Do you mean it?”

“Sure I mean it! I know the way perfectly.”

Kelsie paused a moment more, and he realized that maybe he hadn’t answered quite the question she meant. Some boys liked to pick on girls when they had the chance. He didn’t know how to reassure her about that, so he didn’t try. “I’ll show you.” He turned the scooter around.

Then he realized that there was another problem. She would not be able to keep up with him by foot unless he really poked along. “Uh, maybe you can use the scooter. It’s magic; it’s always coasting downhill.”

She shook her head. “I never saw one of those before.”

Which meant she would be clumsy on it. “Maybe I can find something else for you. I’m good at finding things. What can you use?”

“Use?”

“To ride on, so you can go fast. A bicycle?”

She nodded, understanding. “Skates.”

Well, that would do. “Skates,” he agreed. He looked around—and spied a pair of skates. “There.” He went to pick them up. And paused, disgusted.

They were ice skates. Useless on this paved walk.

Kelsie took them from his hand. She touched their blades

and felt inside. “I wonder.” She sat down and started putting them on.

“But you can’t skate here. Those aren’t roller skates.”

“This is a funny place. I saw some things that seemed like magic. Maybe these are magic skates.”

“Kelsie, they’re *ice* skates! It’s impossible. You’ll fall on your face.”

“They fit perfectly.” She fastened the Velcro and got to her feet.

“But—”

She pushed off and skated across the path. She turned and skated back. Mark just stood there with his mouth open.

“Magic,” she said. “Like your scooter.”

He closed his mouth. “Magic—like my scooter,” he echoed. It did make sense in its fashion.

They set off down the path. Kelsie not only skated, she was good at it. She readily kept pace with him, and her motions were smooth and easy. “These are perfect,” she said. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” he said faintly. This truly was a magic path. The scooter might have had some sensible explanation, but the skates—magic was the only thing.

They crossed one intersection, and another. Mark didn’t hesitate; he knew the way. The path didn’t exist that could confuse him about directions.

Soon they were back at his entrance path. They stopped, and he leaned the scooter against a tree while she exchanged the skates for her regular shoes, which she had carried in her hand. She parked the skates beside the scooter.

They walked to the statue of Pandora, where the path ended. But Kelsie halted, looking alarmed. She said something.

“What?” he asked, for it had sounded like a foreign language.

She repeated it. It *was* a foreign language. Probably Japanese or Chinese.

“Kelsie, speak English, please. I can’t understand you.”

She gazed blankly at him, a look of horror coming to her

face. Then she turned and walked quickly back to the forest.

“Kelsie!” he called, running after her. “Wait! Something’s wrong.”

She said something indecipherable, not stopping.

They reached the scooter and skates. “Kelsie, I don’t know what happened out there,” he said. “I couldn’t understand a word you said, and I don’t think you understood me either. It was as if we were speaking different languages.”

“We were,” she said. “I was speaking Chinese. It is the only language I know.”

“I speak English. It’s all *I* know.”

They gazed at each other.

“I’m getting scared,” Kelsie said.

“Me too. How come we’re understanding each other now? What language are we speaking?”

“Our own. It must be—”

“Magic!” he finished.

She nodded. “And that’s not my town.”

“That’s *my* town. Albany, New York. I just thought you came from there too. Where do you live?”

“Beijing. China.”

He stared at her. It was impossible—but so was scooting always downhill, or ice skating on concrete. And speaking different languages without knowing it.

“You must have come in on a different path.”

“Yes. And I couldn’t find it. I got lost.” She swallowed hard. “I’m still lost.”

“I can find it,” he said. “I’m good at finding things. Even magic things, I guess, though they haven’t been quite what I was looking for. I’ll look for it. Come on.” He took the scooter, before he could really think about the impossibility of all this.

“Thank you.” She sat down and put her skates back on.

Soon they were traveling down the magic path again. “What kind of trees were there?” he asked. “Were there any other special things to mark it?”

“A big candy tree. I didn’t believe it, until I tasted it. Then I

looked for others, and before I knew it, I was lost. I should never have been so foolish.”

“Well, Pandora Park is not what you expect.” He considered. “Let’s go back to where I found you. You didn’t come down my path, so you must have come down the other fork. Maybe if we follow that, we’ll find your entrance.” Meanwhile he hoped that his ability to find things worked on this: not an object, but a particular path.

“I hope so,” she said. “I’m already late returning.”

Mark glanced at his watch. Three quarters of his hour was gone. He would be late too, if there was any further delay.

His sense worked. He led her to an exit with a large candy tree. “There,” he said proudly.

“That’s it!” she exclaimed happily as she almost flung off her skates. “Oh, thank you, Mark!” Impulsively she kissed him on the cheek, then ran past the tree and out of the park.

Mark wiped off his cheek, vaguely disgusted by the kiss, yet pleased to have succeeded. Then he stepped toward the scooter.

His feet moved, but he didn’t. He looked down, surprised.

He was floating. His feet were a foot above the path.

Her kiss must have done it. But how could he walk or use the scooter now?

He reached out to grab a branch of the candy tree. He pulled himself toward it, then handed himself along in the direction Kelsie had gone. He managed to reach the ground as the magic faded, and ran down the path after her.

He caught her just as she was passing the statue. “Kelsie! Kelsie!”

She paused, looking back at him. She didn’t try to speak, knowing it was useless. She just looked questioningly at him.

“Kelsie, I was floating,” he said. “Your kiss did it.”

And of course she didn’t understand.

“Please, you have to see. Come back for a moment.” He gestured back along the path.

She hesitated, then shrugged. She walked back to the park. Once inside, she turned to him. “What are you trying to tell me?”

That you don't believe it's Beijing? Because it is, you know. Didn't you see the buildings?"

Mark hadn't noticed the city's silhouette at all, in his distraction. "No. It's that you made me float. Your kiss did it, I think."

"Mark, I didn't mean anything. I'm impulsive and expressive. I laugh, I cry, I hug, I slap. I get in trouble all the time because I'm not a properly demure Chinese girl. That's why I usually play alone. If I made you mad, I'm sorry, and I apologize. I just was so glad to find home, I forgot myself."

He was learning things. "That's okay. I get in trouble too, because I'm constantly exploring and getting into places I'm not supposed to be. I know how it is. I didn't mean you made me unhappy. I mean you made me float, literally."

She looked at his feet. "Are you teasing me? You're not floating now."

She was right. His feet were firmly on the path. "Well, I *was* floating. Right after you kissed me. Leaving the park must have canceled it, or maybe it just wore out."

"Or maybe you just imagined it."

"No! I really was floating! It was magic. I wish you could see."

"Magic," she said. "Like the scooter and skates?"

"I guess." He swallowed, suddenly nervous. "Maybe you should kiss me again."

"Oh, so that's it!" she flared. "You think I'm a girl, so I should kiss you. What else do you want?"

He blushed. "That sounded wrong. I didn't mean it like that."

She remained angry. "You want to trick me into kissing you, and then you'll laugh about it. That's what boys do."

How had he gotten into this? That *was* the kind of thing boys did to girls. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have chased after you. I'll go home now."

Her mood changed in a flash. "You really *are* sorry, aren't you? And you did help me when I was lost. Very well, I'll kiss you

again.”

“No, you don’t have to—”

She kissed him on the cheek.

He floated.

She stared. “It’s true!”

“It’s true,” he echoed as he drifted upward. “That’s what happened before. That’s your magic talent.”

Now she blushed. “I thought you were teasing me. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be,” he said quickly. “How could you know?”

“I should have trusted you. You helped me, and I didn’t believe you.”

“Well, it’s unbelievable,” he said uncomfortably.

“Next time I’ll believe you.”

“Just catch me before I float away.”

“Oh.” She caught his left foot, which was now at head height, and hauled him down. “You’re like a balloon.”

“Yes. I had to grab the tree branches before. I can’t walk, in air; nothing to push against.”

“Can you swim?”

Why hadn’t he thought of that? “I’ll try.” He tried the breast stroke. His arms seemed to move through the air without resistance, but his body moved forward. He was swimming. “Hey, this is fun!”

But it was slowly wearing off. He was floating lower than before.

“I wonder if it works on other things?”

“Well, you could kiss a stone and see,” he said, smiling.

“I will.” She picked up a stone from beside the path, brought it to her face, and kissed it. Then she let it go.

The stone floated away.

“Now we know,” Mark said, awed. “You’ve got some magic.”

“It seems I do. Thank you for showing me, Mark.”

He laughed. “Thank you for kissing me, Kelsie. I never said that to a girl before.”

She smiled, but seemed pensive. “Maybe we should meet

again. I have to go home before I get in worse trouble for being so late. But I'd like to learn more of this."

"Sure. I can come the same time next week, when Mom's shopping in the mall. Can you make it then?"

"I will try." She hesitated. "I won't kiss you again. But I'll hug you, if that's all right."

"I won't misunderstand," he promised. His feet were now touching the ground; he was light but heavier than air as the effect faded.

She hugged him, then quickly left. He watched her depart, smiling, then stepped lightly to the scooter and lifted it to set it on the path.

The scooter flew up like a feather and collided with a branch overhead, knocking off several candies. Then it dropped back to the ground.

Mark stared. Had the scooter somehow been made light too? No, because it hadn't floated; it had been hurled. Yet he had barely touched it. Had he somehow become strong?

He caught the floating rock, which was now close to the ground. He squeezed it.

The stone cracked and broke apart. The two parts drifted apart, and some gravel made a small cloud.

Super strength? He wasn't ready to believe it. So he picked up a stout stick of wood and tried to break it in half.

The stick broke with a sharp crack.

Then it came to him: Kelsie's kiss had made him float. Her hug had made him strong. She had more than one kind of magic.

But this time he didn't run after her. They had agreed to meet next week; he would tell her then.

Mark glanced at his watch. It was past the marked hour; he was late himself.

He picked up the scooter, which was undamaged, set it in place, and gave a powerful push. He zoomed forward at a frightening pace. His super strength had done it.

He steered to stay on the path, feeling the wind almost whistling past his ears. In a very short time he was back at his

entrance by the chocolate ball tree.

He parked the scooter and consciously slowed himself so that he would not attract attention by almost flying. But he needn't have worried; both his lightness and his strength faded as he left the park. The magic worked only inside it.

He was fifteen minutes late. Mom would be furious. But she wasn't there. Had she gotten fed up and gone home without him? No, she wouldn't do that. She'd just get madder and madder while she searched for him.

So why wasn't she here? Fifteen minutes wasn't *that* late. Something was wrong.

Then his eye caught the big mall clock near the park. He blinked. It was wrong. It was an hour and a quarter slow.

Or was it? The sun did not seem to have moved from where it had been when he entered the park. He saw the same children playing on the slides and swings. Was time different here?

He sat on a bench and thought about it. No, time was not different here. Time was different inside Pandora Park. The hour and a quarter he had spent there didn't count. He must have left it the same time as he entered it. How could that be?

Well, it was magic. That explained everything, maybe.

He continued to ponder. Promptly by outside time, Mom appeared with her arms full of packages. He jumped up to take some of them.

"Thank you, Mark," she said. "Did you find something to do?"

"I sure did, Mom. I found a new section of the park. It was fun." But could he explain the manner of it? He doubted it. "I met a girl."

"You're too young to date," she said immediately.

"I know, Mom. It's not like that. She was lost, and I helped her find her way out. We talked. She's Chinese. Maybe we'll meet again next week."

"That's good," she agreed as they reached the car. She really wasn't paying attention. He was glad of that.

Chapter 2: Flood

The storm came suddenly, raining so hard that Kelsie was soaked before she could get under cover. All she could do was forge on toward the park, hoping to get dry before leaving it.

The storm seemed determined to stop her. Water poured down before her like a liquid wall, splashing and flowing across the pavement. She had to shut her eyes to protect them, take several steps, then peek briefly again for the next few steps.

By the time she reached the park, the water was ankle deep. The park was slightly higher than the surrounding ground, so was like an island surrounded by turbulent waves. This was awful!

She reached the statue of Pandora, with its legend about the foolish girl. The park had been made and named by one of the western companies that had set up a branch in Beijing, maybe to give its employees a sample of western culture, or to make foreigners feel at home. Both her parents worked for one of those companies, because the pay was very good. So she didn't mind Pandora Park, even if it wasn't exactly Chinese.

In fact she had seen a picture of one of the western mythical creatures, a unicorn, and fallen in love. It was just like a beautiful horse with a fierce horn on its forehead. How she wished she could ride a creature like that! But of course that was foolish, and she had never been a foolish girl. Impulsive, expressive, yes, but not foolish.

Except when she had discovered the magic path and heedlessly followed it into the magic land. And promptly gotten lost in it. By the time the American boy, Mark, found her and helped

her find her way back, she had been hopelessly late.

Then the weirdest thing happened: she wasn't late at all. It was hard to believe at first, but it seemed that no time at all had passed outside the park while she was inside it. She had come out the same time she had entered. So she wasn't in trouble—but now faced a mystery that perhaps was worse. Had she suffered a delusion, a mental lapse that put her sanity into question—or had she really had the adventure she remembered? She hadn't dared tell her family about it. At best they would not have believed her.

She was just getting wetter, if that were possible, standing here before the statue. What was she to do? Trudge home, which was within walking distance because of the company-provided housing, or risk entering the park again? She had agreed to meet Mark, and this was the day, but she hadn't counted on the weather. She didn't want to meet him soaking wet. He would ask her to take off her clothing to get it dry, and she was just old enough to know she couldn't let herself be unclothed before a boy. Especially a foreign boy. Most especially a pushy American boy. They did not understand about the need to save face, to avoid humiliation. So probably she should go home. Maybe Mark would understand when she didn't show up.

Yet perhaps her major vice was her curiosity. She wanted to know everything about everything, ridiculous as that was. This seemingly magic park—she was desperate to learn more about it. Even if she was all wet. Even at the risk of losing face.

She looked around. The streets were definitely flooding, making a lake of this section of the city. Men were sloshing about in hip-high wading boots, maybe seeing to flooded electrical conduits. If she went out there they would quickly intercept her and insist on taking her home. Or somewhere. She didn't trust that at all. She couldn't go home until the water receded, and that might be a while.

That made her decision for her. She touched Pandora's Box, and saw the magic path appear, as it had before. It glistened, strangely dry. She followed it into the magic park. Pandora Park, where perhaps there was hope. Hope that she could get her clothing

dry before going to meet Mark.

Mark was already there, by her entrance. “Kelsie! You’re wet!”

So much for hope. “It’s raining,” she said shortly. “It’s flooding.”

“So did you swim here?”

“No!” she snapped. Then she realized that he was teasing her, and didn’t mean to hurt her feelings. “Do you want to see?”

“Okay.”

They went back out. The path remained dry, and no rain fell on them. It was almost as though it were protected by a glass shield. But beyond it the storm continued to dump buckets of water down.

Mark said something, but she couldn’t understand a word. “You’re speaking American,” she reminded him.

“Oops!” That much she understood.

They retreated to the edge of the forest.

“Wow!” Mark said, repeating his words. “This is like an island for a lighthouse during a hurricane.”

“We don’t get typhoons in Beijing.” But it was a nice image.

“Come on. You’ve got to get dry before you freeze.”

“No.” But now that he mentioned it, she was shivering. She did have to change.

“Oh, come on, Kelsie. You said you’d trust me next time. I’m not trying to embarrass you. You just have to get out of those soaking wet clothes before you catch cold.”

“The temperature has nothing to do with that illness.”

“You know what I mean. Come on, you’re shivering.” He took hold of her plastered sleeve.

She slapped him. “Hands off!”

“Okay, I didn’t mean—” He broke off.

He had reason. His own clothes had fallen off, leaving him bare except for his purple trunks, which he had grabbed.

Kelsie stared in amazement. Her slap must have done it. A magic slap.

He stooped to grab the bundle of fallen clothing, holding it protectively before him. “Oh my gosh!”

She had to smile. “You look funny!”

He was blushing. “You have more magic! You know I didn’t try to flash you.”

She had to relent. “I know. And you’re right: I must change. But I won’t take your clothes. Find me a dress. And don’t look back.”

He nodded, and walked away. It had definitely been magical, as the clothing had simply dropped in front of him without ever being removed. Except for the trunks.

The moment he was gone, she got out of her own clothing. His T-shirt lay on the path where it had fallen; in his distraction he had not thought to check to be sure he had all his things. She had a use for it: she put on the T-shirt, which fit her reasonably well and extended down to her legs like a skirt. At least it was dry. Now she would not be naked when he returned. Even this undershirt was a considerable embarrassment, but she didn’t have much choice. She had to get dry and warm quickly.

Soon he was back with a garment. “I found this,” he said. “It’s a fancy dress.”

She took it and held it out before her. “That’s a strapless evening gown!”

He looked a bit awkward. “I never seem to find exactly what I’m looking for. Just something close.”

“You clown! I can’t wear this.” Not for five or six years.

“I’m sorry. I’ll try again.” He headed off. He was dressed now, though surely without his undershirt. He seemed not to have noticed what she was wearing. That could be inattention, or courtesy. He was a very understanding boy.

She thought about what he had said about not finding quite the right thing. Like a scooter instead of a bicycle, or ice skates instead of roller skates. His magic was not completely convenient. It was similar to hers, in that respect.

Mark returned, this time carrying a clown suit. Oh, no! She shouldn’t have called him a clown; that must have affected his talent.

She decided to make the best of it. “I’ll wear it. Thank you.”

She climbed into the suit, which was baggy enough to fit anyone. Would the evening gown have fit similarly, despite her youth? The magic of the park was odd, and did not seem to be entirely random.

“Maybe I can find something to dry your clothing,” he said. He set off again—and returned with a twisted mass of pipe resembling a caterpillar, with several sections supported by little feet. “I don’t know what this is, but it’s warm.”

“It’s a radiator,” she said. “I read about it in school. Steam or hot water passes through it to make it hot, and it heats the room.”

He set it carefully on the path. “I don’t see any connections, but it seems to work. It’s getting hot.”

He was right. She set her wet clothing on it. The heat should dry it soon enough. “It’s magic,” she said. That was the universal explanation for the mysteries of this park. She hovered near it, absorbing its wonderful warmth. That soaking had really chilled her.

He nodded, agreeing. “Magic is wonderful.”

Now at last they could talk while they waited. They sat down beneath the candy tree and plucked and ate candies, which were very sweet and good. She remained near the radiator, getting more comfortable. It might be an outdated device, but right now it was exactly what she needed.

“Did you know that there is no time outside the park?” he asked.

“I discovered that. I don’t understand it.”

“My watch kept time, but it didn’t match outside time. I had to set it back an hour and a quarter.”

Kelsie didn’t have a watch. She suppressed a tinge of envy. “Yes. I thought I was late, but I was early.”

“Odd how we came back here at exactly the same time. I came in the morning.”

“I came in the afternoon. I couldn’t get away before then. Not without arousing suspicion.”

“So we weren’t together, outside, in place *or* time. But we were together inside. I wondered.”

“It seems that time doesn’t change inside, when we’re

outside,” she agreed.

“It’s as if the park doesn’t exist for anyone else. We’re the only two to find it.”

“True,” she said, surprised. “But who would make a magic park just for us?”

He nodded seriously. “I don’t want to be paranormal, but—”
“Paranoid,” she said.

“You’re as bad as my mother,” he said, annoyed.

“I apologize. I happen to know the term.”

Then they both paused. “How can you correct my word, when we don’t speak the same language?” he asked. “This is really weird.”

“We do speak the same language,” she said. “Just not our own. This must be a dialect that includes all the words we need. So when you use the wrong word, it still comes out wrong, because the language doesn’t know what you mean, and I can correct it. But I don’t mean to be unkind; if it bothers you, I’ll stop.”

“No, I foul up words sometimes. Girls are better at words than boys are.”

“And boys at math.” It was true, in her experience. But she did have a large vocabulary for her age; others had remarked on it, not always favorably.

“Oh, there’s something else. I was going to tell you, but the rain—the clothes—”

She smiled briefly. “I remember.”

“Yes. You hugged me, and it made me strong.”

She considered that. “You are serious.”

“Yes. I crushed a stone. In fact, there it is.” He pointed to a small pile of rubble.

“Another magic talent? This is—”

“Weird.”

“I don’t mean to question your word. But if you don’t mind, I would like to see it.”

Mark stood up. “Hug me.”

She approached him somewhat cautiously, though by now she knew she could trust him. She put her arms around him and

hugged. Then she stepped back, feeling a flush beginning.

He picked up another stone. He squeezed it in one hand. It cracked into several fragments.

Kelsie was impressed, but it might have been a weak stone. “Could you, well, pick me up?”

“Sure. But I don’t want to hurt you. I could crush a bone without meaning to.”

“Put out your hands, flat.”

He did so. She faced away from him, put her hands on his arms and boosted herself up to sit on his hands.

“You feel light as a feather.”

“Lift me up.”

Slowly he raised his hands until he was holding her at head height. He was not straining. He really was strong. He wasn’t even off-balance, as he should have been, considering her weight. That seemed to be more magic.

She jumped down to the ground. “Thank you for telling me. I did not know of this. But how is it that I have three talents, while you have only one? You must have others you have not yet discovered.”

“Maybe,” he agreed. “Or maybe it’s just that I find different kinds of things, like objects, or entrances, or maybe when I found you, that was my talent. So each type of thing counts as a talent.”

“That might be,” she agreed. “Your talent is perceptive, while mine is affective.”

“Is what?”

She had done it again, using adult words. “I’m sorry. I mean that my talent affects what I touch. Yours locates things like skates. You find things; I change them. I did not mean to be obnoxious.”

Mark laughed. “That’s your curse, isn’t it! You use rare words, and that annoys people.”

Kelsie nodded. “I’m trying to stop it, but every so often an atypical term comes out.”

He laughed again, and this time she laughed with him. “And you can’t stop it! You’re just a brainy girl.”

“My parents are scientists,” she said. “I learn from them.”

And I lose friends.”

“Well, you haven’t lost me. I like you.” Then he looked embarrassed. “That is—I mean—”

She caught on. “If your friends heard that, they would tease you cruelly. You can’t be friends with a girl. Unless she’s a girlfriend.”

“That’s it. And I’m too young to date. So I don’t know what to say.”

“It’s the same with me. We are of a type.”

“A type?”

“We don’t get along well with others, so we find ourselves alone without meaning to be.”

“That’s it! I’m bored with regular things. I like to find new things, like paths. Others don’t understand.”

“I understand,” she said. “Do you like puzzles?”

“Sure. But most are too easy.”

“You’re intelligent too. It gets in your way.”

“No! I’m just a regular guy.” He paused. “No, you’re right. I’m not smart, exactly, but there’s something.”

“Tell me. I am interested.”

He smiled. “I like that you’re interested. It’s like this: Another boy was reading this comic, where a spaceman blasted this BEM, and—”

“This what?”

“BEM. Bug-Eyed Monster. A scary alien creature with insect orbs.”

“Thank you. I will remember. I apologize for interrupting.”

“You’re too polite. But I like it. Anyway, I said what about the monster? Didn’t it have feelings too? Why just shoot it on sight? Maybe if you just talked with it a while, it would be okay.”

“Yes!”

He was startled. “You understand?”

“Yes. You had empathy.” Then, before he could ask, she clarified it. “You felt for the monster. You understood that it had its own viewpoint. That maybe the spaceman was a dangerous freak to it, and sure enough, the spaceman killed it. So the chance for an

acquaintance was lost.”

“That’s it!”

“But you lost your friend. He thought you were—”

“Weird,” he agreed.

“I don’t. I don’t like to hurt anything, not even a real bug. I cried when they poisoned the termites in our house.”

“Yeah. Nobody understands about that.”

They gazed at each other, feeling the warmth of mutual appreciation.

Then Kelsie got an idea. “Pandora Park—do you think it has limited access? I mean, that it lets in only people of a certain type? We haven’t seen anyone else here.”

“Could be,” he agreed. “Lots of kids must touch Pandora’s Box, but if they’d found the magic path, they’d have come for the candy.”

That reminded her of something else. “I like candy, but I think I’ve had more than enough of it. I’ll get sick. But if I have to remain here for a time, until the floodwaters recede, I’ll need to eat something.”

“I know what you mean. Too much candy’s no good. But I’m the only kid on my block who thinks that. Maybe I can find something healthier to eat. Like French Fried Potatoes.”

That was what he considered healthy? She refrained from commenting. “Yes. Vegetables.”

“I’ll look.” He got up and glanced around. “There!” He went to a mound they hadn’t noticed before and picked something up. “Oh.”

It was a raw potato. Once again he hadn’t found exactly what he was looking for.

She didn’t want to discourage him. “That’s fine. We’ll use several of them. We just need to cook them. We can make our own fried potatoes.”

“I guess,” he said uncertainly.

“Find a cook pot.”

He looked around again, exploring along the path. He found something and brought it back, looking embarrassed.

“A chamber pot!” she exclaimed, laughing.

“A potty,” he agreed. “We can’t use this. I mean, not for cooking.”

Kelsie inspected it. “Yes we can. It’s clean. A pot’s a pot. But we’ll need firewood, and water, and spices.”

“You know how to do this? I sure don’t.”

“I’m a girl,” she reminded him. “I’m supposed to know.”

“Maybe I can find a river for water.” He looked around. “There’s a spring.”

“That is close enough.” She took the pot and went to dip out some water. Had the spring been there before? Mark’s talent might be more than merely finding things; he might be magically making them. But the idea of that made her nervous, so she didn’t mention it.

Then she smelled something. Some kind of perfume.

She sniffed the pot of water. That was the source. She touched one finger to it and tasted it. “Toilet water!” she exclaimed. “You found toilet water.”

“I thought it was clean,” Mark protested. “Maybe the potty was dirty.”

“Toilet water is not from toilets. It is dilute perfume.”

“Oh,” he said, abashed. “My talent strikes again.”

“I’ll look for the water,” she said. “Now you look for the firewood.”

Mark found a pile of dry boards and wood edgings immediately. She hadn’t seen them appear, so probably they had been there all the time. It was too bad to have to burn them, but it obviously wasn’t in him to find straight firewood. Still, his talent was uncanny.

Meanwhile she located another spring. This one had straight water. She poured out the scented liquid and rinsed the pot, then dipped fresh water.

“And fire,” she said as she arranged the edgings into a pyramid, added small boards, and then some dry moss. She knew how to make a fire, except for the first spark. “That may be more of a challenge.”

But he found an old cigarette lighter. Had someone lost it, or had he made it?

She tried the lighter. It formed a sturdy flame. In moments she had the fire blazing around the base of the pot. “We will also need a kitchen knife to cut the potato.”

“I’ll find one,” he agreed.

But what he found wasn’t exactly a kitchen knife. It was a sword.

Well, sort of. It had the size and shape of a great curved sword, but seemed to be made of dark wood.

“I think I goofed worse this time,” he said. “This isn’t a sword after all. It’s a fake.”

Kelsie looked at it. “That’s a Japanese Bokken! I know it from histories.”

“A what?”

“A wooden sword used for practice, having the same weight and balance as a real katana, but without a sharp blade. So warriors could practice without hurting their partners, until they got good enough to use real steel swords.”

“I’ll look again,” Mark said, still embarrassed.

“No, this will do,” she said quickly. She took the mock sword and tried rather awkwardly to cut a potato with it.

The wood blade sliced through as if the potato were made of mist. It required no effort, seeming to respond to her will. Soon she had all the potatoes sliced and in the pot.

“I just thought of something,” Mark said. “That flood—it won’t go away.”

“Of course it will. The water will start receding as soon as the rain stops. Even if it’s a really bad flood, two or three days will be enough.”

“But you don’t have that time. There is no time outside, remember? No matter how much time passes here.”

Kelsie froze, appalled. “I’m a fool!”

“No, no! I didn’t think of it either. Until just now.”

“I can’t go out,” she said numbly. “I don’t know what to do.” She felt the tears coming.

“It’s all right, Kelsie,” he said quickly. “We’ll figure out something.”

A way to make time pass normally outside? She doubted it. Then she had an idea. “Mark, you can find things. Can you find a way out of this problem?”

He spread his hands. “I don’t know how to look.”

Of course he didn’t. There might be no way. She was determined not to cry.

Chapter 3:

Sword

Mark saw Kelsie trying to be brave about it, and knew he had to do something to distract her from what might be a hopeless problem. “We’ve got all the time we need to think about it,” he said. “Maybe something will occur. Meanwhile we’ve got the meal started. You sure know what you’re doing.”

She smiled somewhat weakly. “Thank you. But we need more than potatoes.”

“I’ll find it,” he said eagerly. And he did. Soon they had carrots, cabbage, squash, onions, and tomatoes cooking along with the potatoes. All the things he hated to eat at home. They had not been exactly what he sought, but that was the way of his talent.

“Salt,” Kelsie said. “We need some salt.”

Mark looked, and found a solid brown salt block, the kind that animals licked. But Kelsie used the wood sword to cut off a small amount, and used it to flavor the broth. She didn’t complain about any of the wrong things he found, she just found a way to use it. She was a really practical girl.

In due course they had a meal of vegetable soup, served in thick glass mugs he had found when looking for dishes. And chopsticks. He had sought regular silverware, but Kelsie was delighted, and showed him how to use them. It was mainly a matter of holding the mugs up close to their faces and using the chopsticks to move things a few inches to their mouths. He was clumsy and she was not, but she complimented him on his progress. She was very easy to get along with. Maybe she was just trying hard.

They finished what turned out to be a perfectly decent meal.

Kelsie had truly made the best of it. But he knew she was miserable inside, as she quietly cleaned the pot and mugs at the spring. Pandora Park was a fine place to visit, but she didn't want to be locked into it forever.

He looked at the pretend sword he had found. Some kitchen knife! But he wondered about something. Kelsie had used it to slice vegetables, and seemed to have no trouble. Was it that she was expert with knives—or swords? Even wooden ones? Or was there something about this mock weapon? The Bokken, she had called it.

Some of the other devices he had found had turned out to be magic. The scooter, the skates. Could this piece of wood be magic too?

He picked it up and swung it. It was quite light in his hand. Was it because he was strong, after Kelsie's hug? No, that had slowly worn off, and he was pretty much back to normal strength now. So was it merely a very light imitation sword? That wouldn't be much good in a fight; it would bounce off an enemy, having no real edge. Yet Kelsie had used it without difficulty, and she wasn't super-strong.

In fact that dull wooden edge had sliced those vegetables with no trouble at all. How could that be?

He set up a stick and dropped the Bokken on it. A light sword wouldn't cut far through the stick, and a wood one would bounce off harmlessly.

The sword sliced cleanly through the stick and half buried itself in the ground below. That looked like a full-weight cut!

He tried it on a larger branch, and the result was the same. The sword felt light, but it cut like a cleaver.

He lifted it and struck a pose, as if saluting an enemy on a battlefield. The sword moved with no hesitation. He made a sudden slash, and it whipped around exactly as he intended. He approached a stump, pretending it was a leg-chomping crocodile. "Take that, varlet!" he said, running it through the head. The sword skewered the stump, killing it instantly.

Kelsie applauded. "You're a swordsman," she said.

He was intrigued. "It has to be the sword. I couldn't swing it,

let alone fight with it, on my own. It's magic."

She nodded. "I thought so when I used it. It was light in my hand and cut clean. But I wasn't sure." Then she reconsidered. "But it was a Bokken. Now it looks like a real katana."

They both looked at it, surprised. The thing had a fancy handle and a wickedly gleaming length of shining steel, sharp on both edges. This was no mock sword; it was real.

"It really is magic," Mark said, awed. "A real sword that shows itself only when actually used. That's why it cut the potato so readily."

"I never realized," she said. "It did seem to be very sharp wood. But you're very good with it, anyway."

"No I'm not," he protested. "It knows the moves. I just have to make the effort, and it carries through. I could be invincible with this."

"Like a samurai warrior."

"Are you laughing at me?"

"I wouldn't dare. Not while you have that sword."

He let that pass. "This must have belonged to a warrior. He must have been a terror. But I don't think I should keep it."

"Why not? There might be BEMS."

"Who I don't want to fight. They might not mean any harm. Anyway, I don't think it's right to use magic to make myself what I'm not. I haven't earned any warrior status."

"I don't understand, and I'd like to. Wouldn't the sword make you safer?"

Mark considered. "I'm not sure it would. Suppose I used it, and got to depend on it, and then suddenly when I most needed it, it stopped being magic? Then where would I be?"

"Maybe you should earn it, then."

"How would I do that? I don't know a thing about swordcraft."

"But the sword does. Maybe it could teach you."

"Now *I* don't understand."

"It knows the moves, you say. You could study them, and learn how to do it yourself. Then you'd be worthy of it."

Mark thought about it. It made an odd kind of sense. “Maybe I can learn the basics, if I practice hard. You can swing the sword, and I’ll see how to stop it.”

“I don’t want to do that! I could kill you.”

“I don’t think so. Not if the sword knows the difference between practice and real battle.”

“You’d better get some armor, regardless. We wouldn’t want an accident.”

Mark searched, and found some football padding. That hadn’t been what he was looking for, but it was better than nothing. He also found a light wooden pole: a staff.

They took their places on the path. “Now make a feint,” he said. “You know, a pretend attack.”

“If I hurt you, I’ll faint.”

He smiled. “I’ll do worse than that, if you cut me. I don’t want to bleed to death. So please be careful.”

She struck at him, just missing his side. Mark’s wooden staff wasn’t anywhere close; he could have been skewered. “I see I have some work to do,” he said ruefully.

“You’d better practice with the sword, and study its moves. Then you can practice against it.”

“Good idea.” He took the sword back from her and fenced with shadows. There were certain positions the sword nudged him into, and certain motions it made; it was indeed instructing him.

He decided to concentrate on a few basic moves, so that he could do them well enough without magic if he had to. He also tried to use both hands, as that would double his strength on the sword. It might look clumsy, but it could serve him well in an emergency.

Watching him, Kelsie nodded. “It occurs to me that there’s more to magic than just finding things or making people float. That sword has a mind of its own.”

“It sure does!” he agreed breathlessly.

Before long he was ready to take a break. He leaned the sword against a tree, where it changed back to the Bokken. “Your clothes must be dry by now.”

She checked. “They are. I don’t want to seem critical, but I’ll

be glad to get out of this clown suit.”

“I’m sorry I couldn’t find something better.”

“The suit did the job.” She put her hand on the shirt, and paused.

He sat down facing away from her, and closed his eyes. “But you know, Kelsie, the way you cope with things, like the not-quite-right items I find—you’re some girl.”

“Thank you for understanding. I really appreciate it. About not looking, I mean. I don’t know about the rest.”

“I don’t mix much with girls. But I get along just fine with you.”

“It is much the same with me, with boys. And with you.” Then after a rustling pause. “You know I’m wearing your undershirt.”

“Yes, I saw when I brought the clown suit. You needed something.”

“I—I don’t feel comfortable taking it off now, to put on my own. Not with you there.”

“I’ll go,” he said quickly.

“No! You’d have to open your eyes to get up and go anywhere.”

“Then leave it on,” he said. “No one will know.”

There was a pause. “Thank you.” Then, after a further rustle, “I am garbed.”

He opened his eyes, got up, and turned. Kelsie was back in her original clothing, as far as anything that showed. “You look fine.”

“Thank you. You made it possible.”

“You make a lot of things possible too. If a monster attacked us, you could hug me and make me strong enough to fend it off. Or you could make me float out of its reach.”

“I would gladly do that.”

“Or you could slap me, and my clothes would fall off, and it would die laughing.”

“I apologize for embarrassing you. I did not know what would happen.”

“I was joking,” he said, slightly uncomfortably. She tended to take things literally.

“I’m still sorry I slapped you. I shouldn’t have. You were just trying to help. I reacted without thinking.”

“No, I shouldn’t have pulled on your sleeve. I was the one who wasn’t thinking.”

“You’re nice.”

“So are you.”

“I would like to understand this park better,” Kelsie said, changing the subject. “It seems like an ideal playground. But who made it, and why?”

“That’s what I would like to know.”

“Let’s follow some of these paths,” she suggested. “Maybe one of them leads somewhere.”

“They *all* should lead somewhere,” he said.

“Not if they merely loop around and intersect each other. They might be designed to confuse anyone who seeks more than merely seeing the sights.”

She had a point. “I’m good with paths,” he said. “But I could get confused. Let’s mark where we go, so we’ll know if we intersect it.”

“Then you had better find some markers.”

“Bread crumbs,” he said.

“No, that wouldn’t do at all! Birds would eat them.”

“I was joking. We have a fairy tale about children lost in the woods, who marked their trail with bread crumbs, and of course the birds did eat them.”

“Oh, irony. I apologize for misunderstanding.”

“Well, you don’t have the same fairy tales I do, I guess. I shouldn’t have used it.”

“We speak the same language here, whatever it is, but we don’t always perfectly understand each other.”

“I’ll find something. Maybe marking tape.”

“Yes.”

Mark looked. Soon he found tape. Several big rolls of masking tape.

“We can use it,” Kelsie said. “But sticking it to the entire length of every path would be tedious. Maybe just every intersection, and periodically between intersections.”

“That sounds good to me,” he agreed.

But they knew they would need a lot of tape. “Make me strong, so I can carry it all,” Mark suggested.

“No. You need to be on guard, with your sword. I’ll make the rolls light enough for me to carry.”

“Can you do that?” But he remembered how she had made a stone float.

“We’ll see.” She picked up a roll and kissed it. It floated. She unwound some tape and connected the roll to another roll, kissing that too. Soon she had a floating mass of rolls resembling a collection of balloons on strings.

Mark took his sword and started walking along a path. Kelsie followed, marking it occasionally with X’s of masking tape.

The path intersected another. Mark chose one path, and Kelsie marked that one with an X.

Soon he encountered another intersection. Kelsie marked that also.

This was getting dull. “I’d like to find something exciting,” Mark said.

“All you have to do is look for it,” she reminded him.

Oh. Just about everything they had found in the park they had found because he was looking, even though he never found exactly what he was looking for. “Like maybe a BEM,” he said, smiling.

There was a roar. A tusky scaly monster came charging down the path ahead of them. It looked something like an ugly pig in armor, almost as tall as Mark and far more massive. Kelsie screamed, letting go of the rolls of tape.

Mark stepped forward, lifting his sword. “Stop!” he cried.

The monster charged right past him, so swiftly that Mark did not even stab at it. It closed on Kelsie.

She screamed again, but it came right up to her, opening its enormously toothy mouth. The front tusks seemed about to skewer

her. Mark tried to run back to help, but knew he wouldn't be in time.

Kelsie slapped the monster on the snout. That feeble gesture would have been laughable, if the crisis weren't so serious.

The monster's scales fell off. So did a tusk or two. All that was left was pinkish bare pigskin. The thing suddenly looked much less fearsome.

The three of them stared: Mark, Kelsie, and the pig monster. Then, embarrassed, it spun about, plunged off the path and into the thick brush.

"Scales—like clothing," Mark said, astonished.

"I didn't realize," she said. "I just didn't want to get bitten."

"You stopped it yourself. Some hero I turned out to be!"

"It avoided you. It must have known the sword would hurt it."

"And it thought you couldn't hurt it. Now we know."

"Now we know," she agreed. But she was plainly shaken.

"And now I know," he said. "I can't just stand there with the sword. I need to wield it."

"I'm sure you will, as you get more practice."

"Thank you," he said, exactly as she normally did.

She smiled. "Let's complete our exploration. We still hardly know this park."

"Yes. But maybe I'd better not wish for another BEM. I didn't even get that right."

"It didn't have bug-eyes," she agreed. "Only little pig-eyes. But it certainly scared me."

They continued along the path. It led them past gardens of candy canes, pools of ice cream, and mountains of cookies. But these delicacies were wasted on two children who had already figured out that candy was not always good for them.

"Even this is getting dull," Mark said. "But I'm afraid to look for anything really interesting."

"Maybe a fun park section," she suggested. "Something that can't chase us."

"Good idea!" He thought of a great amusement center he had

been to once, that had everything. How far wrong could that go?

Then they came to an amusement park section, with a Ferris wheel, bumper car arena, and a roller coaster. Mark didn't see anything wrong with it, and that made him nervous. Something was always wrong with the things he found. Why should this be any different? But what was it? Everything looked normal.

Their best course might be to pass it by. But then he saw Kelsie gazing longingly at the roller coaster. Maybe they didn't have them in China.

"Take a ride?" he asked her, half-hoping she would change her mind.

"Oh, yes!" Oh, well.

They went to the starting point. There were no other people, and no ticket taker. A single car sat on the tracks. They got in, fastened the seat belts, and the car started moving.

"This is meant to be scary," he reminded her. They could still change their minds.

"Yes. I have seen them in films. I always wanted to ride one, but we never could."

So much for that. Yet he saw nothing wrong with the roller coaster. Could he have gotten it right, for once?

The car reached the base of the lift. It angled up on the track, then rose up the steep grade. It climbed to a dizzying height, leveled off, then came to the first horrendous drop. Kelsie watched it all, rapt.

The car tilted down, moving faster and faster, and the wind whipped hard against their faces. "Oooo!" Kelsie breathed, loving it.

So were they going to crash? Mark remained nervous.

They zoomed down, then around a sharp curve that flung Kelsie into him despite the seat belts, and coasted up the next rise. And down again, this time into a brief dark tunnel. In the middle of it there was what felt like a break in the track; the car jumped, and Kelsie screamed, but then it found its footing and rolled on out of the tunnel.

"It's a small drop in the track," Mark explained. "In the dark

it feels like a crash, but the wheels never leave the track. They can't; they're locked on." Here he was reassuring her, when all the time he was afraid of a real crash. He just knew there would be something wrong.

"It's so wonderful," she said, impressed.

The car completed the route and returned to the starting place. But it didn't stop; it raced right on through and started a second circuit.

"Something's wrong," Mark said, alarmed. "It's supposed to glide to a stop, so people can get off and new ones get on." Was this what he had feared?

"Maybe we rate a second ride," she said, excited.

But when the car zoomed through the starting point and started a third loop, Kelsie became as alarmed as Mark. Not only was it not stopping, it was getting faster. This was dangerous.

"We've got to stop it," Mark said.

"How?"

"I think there's a switch at the top, in case of emergency."

"Can you reach it?" For there was good clearance on either side of the track.

Mark brought out the sword. "With this maybe I can."

When the car slowed near the top, Mark stabbed at the emergency stop button with the point of the sword. He could never have done it alone, but the magic of the sword guided it to exactly where he aimed, and it poked the button.

The car screeched to a halt at the top of the highest rise. They had stopped it—but now they were stranded without any easy route down.

"I know," Mark said, undoing his seat belt. "Hug me, then kiss me."

She nodded, understanding. She hugged him, and he felt the strength forming. Then she kissed him on the cheek, and he became floating light.

Now he put his arms around her, lifted her easily, and stopped off the side of the track. They floated down at half speed, her weight slowing his floating. He landed, and his mighty legs

touched the ground and held, not getting broken or even injured.

He set her back on her feet. "Don't let go of me," he said. "I could still float away."

"You saved me," she said.

"Well, you saved me."

"We saved each other. We work well together."

"I was afraid I wouldn't find exactly what I looked for. I was looking for a good, safe, amusement park."

"Oh, I forgot!" she said, dismayed. "I should have questioned it."

"Not your fault."

They resumed checking and marking the path. Soon it led them back to their starting point. It was a loop, taking them to whatever they looked for, but nothing else.

"I guess I'd better just practice with the sword right here," Mark said, vaguely disappointed.

"I wish I could go home," Kelsie said.

"I'll try to look for a way. While I practice. Of course it won't be exactly what we want, but maybe there's be something.

"That would be nice."

"Yeah." But he hadn't been able to do that type of search before. Still, he wanted to be positive, so she wouldn't be depressed.

He concentrated on basic moves with the sword, while also trying to think of something that would help Kelsie. Even though he feared it was hopeless. Just so long as she thought there was real hope.

He smiled. The hope from Pandora's box, maybe.

Chapter 4: America

Kelsie was depressed. Mark was clearly finding his place, using what he found to improve himself. But she was just marking time. How could she wait out the storm, when time did not pass outside as long as she was here?

“I got it!” Mark said suddenly.

“You have what?”

“The answer! I know how you can get past that storm.”

“I would love that.” She was desperate. “How?”

“You can visit me. In America. Then you’ll be out of the park, and time will resume outside. When enough has passed you can return to the park, and to your entrance.”

That just might work. But there were bad problems. “How would your family feel about it?”

“Oh, they’d understand. I think. You could explain.”

“I can’t speak your language.”

He looked dismayed. “I forgot about that.”

Still, it was an idea. “Perhaps you could explain for me. At least you could ask. It would be understandable if they refused.”

“I’ll ask,” he agreed. “But should I go out separately? We think time freezes inside the park, but can we be sure? Suppose I came back in ten minutes and it’s two days for you?”

“That’s ridiculous. And it makes me nervous. We’d better go together.”

“Come on, then. We’ll have to wait most of an hour in the outer park, until Mom comes to pick me up. We won’t be able to talk there, either, so we’ll have to cover the bases before we step

out.”

“The bases?”

“What you need to know. What we can tell them. I don’t think we can tell them the truth. It’s not that I want to lie; it’s that they won’t believe it.”

“We need to practice the art of the ellipsis.”

“The what?”

“Leaving out just enough so they think they understand more than they do. Tell them I’m a friend who got flooded out. They’ll assume I’m from another section of your town. It won’t be a lie, exactly.”

“Got it. I’ll tell them as much of the truth as I think they can handle. I’d like to tell it all, but that will have to wait. You just smile and do whatever Mom says. Deal?” He extended his hand.

“Deal,” she agreed, taking his hand.

“Oh, no!”

“What’s the matter?”

“I think I just discovered another one of your magic talents. You shook my hand—and suddenly I have to tell the exact truth.”

“Another talent! That’s interesting. But will it carry over outside?”

“I guess not. But I’ll try for the truth anyway.”

They cleaned up their camping site, so as not to litter the magical park. Mark found vines and strapped the sword to his back, while Kelsie hung the cleaned pot on a branch of the candy tree for safekeeping. Then he scooted and she skated along the paths that were so familiar to him and so confusing to her.

She got nervous as they approached the chocolate ball tree that marked his entrance. Was this really wise? But what was the alternative?

“You don’t have to do this,” Mark said, evidently noting her distress. “It’s just an idea.”

“But I have no better idea. But promise me, if it goes wrong, return me to the park.”

“I promise. One way or another I’ll get you back here. I’d be nervous about staying with your folks too; I know how it is.”

That was his empathy, the way he understood her feelings, and she very much appreciated it. He would do for her what he would want her to do for him, if they traded places. She stepped toward him, then drew herself up short. “Apology,” she murmured.

“You were going to kiss me!” he said. “But you stifled the impulse.”

“Yes. I cannot afford to act impulsively. There are magic consequences.”

“Thanks. But you know, all we have to do is step outside the park, and the magic is gone. So it wouldn’t have mattered.”

“True. So I can kiss you outside.”

He looked distressed.

“I was teasing,” she said quickly. “I know you don’t like it.”

“No, I’m afraid I *would* like it.” Then he looked stricken. “I didn’t mean to say that.”

“The handshake!” she said, remembering. “It makes you tell the truth.”

“Yeah.”

This was getting to be pretty much of a friendship. “I promise not to embarrass you in any way I can avoid. I will be a very proper girl in your house. But you will have to speak for me.”

“I will.” He took a deep breath. “Are we ready?”

“Let’s find out.” She stepped forth.

It was a children’s park much like the one in Beijing, complete with the statue of Pandora with her box. The same company must have made it. But why? With the ability to make magic, it obviously did not need to cater to children. The whole business made her nervous when she thought about it. She would have to discuss it further with Mark, when they could talk to each other again.

They sat on a bench and waited, because no time had passed here, just as none had passed at her entrance. That was another thing: that company could control time in a remarkable manner. So again, why waste it on children? Why weren’t they using it to make a fabulous fortune in the world? It didn’t seem to make sense, and she distrusted that. She was sure it did make sense, but not

necessarily a sense they would like.

Three children ran by, followed by a parent. They were crying out in English, and about all Kelsie understood was the word O-kay. She felt strangely weak, because she couldn't talk here.

At last the hour passed. A woman approached, carrying packages. Mark touched Kelsie's hand briefly, reassuringly, and got up to meet the woman. Kelsie remained seated, letting him handle it. He took the packages from his mother. He talked rapidly.

After a moment the woman turned to fix a sharp gaze on Kelsie. Kelsie smiled agreeably. What else could she do?

The woman turned back to Mark, shaking her head. Of course she wouldn't let him bring home a strange girl like a stray puppy he found in the street.

But Mark was firm. Kelsie knew he was telling her how this friend he had met in the park had been flooded out of her neighborhood and had nowhere to go. He had to help her. It would be for only a few days. Please, Mom, please!

The woman came to Kelsie, who dutifully stood before her. "Troo?" she asked. Behind her, Mark slowly nodded. She needed to agree.

Kelsie nodded, blushing.

The woman stood for a moment, plainly disturbed. Of course she couldn't simply put a helpless girl on the street, but neither did she want to bring her into her home.

After an agonizingly long pause, she decided. She gestured curtly toward the path.

Weak with relief, Kelsie walked in that direction. Mark didn't try to speak to her; he was leaving her to his mother. Indeed, the woman took her elbow, guiding her as if she were blind. This was a strong-minded parent. Kelsie knew the type, thinking of her own mother.

They came to the family's car, which was larger than the cars seen in China. There were many others parked near it, and very few bicycles. That was quite different from what she knew.

Kelsie went to get into the back seat, but the woman guided her to the front. Obediently she got in beside the driver, while Mark

put the packages in back and got in himself. He was no longer talking. He had made his case.

The woman started the car and drove along the street. The houses were larger and fancier than the ones Kelsie knew, and their flat-tiled roofs were odd. Every house had a perfect green lawn, too. This was truly a wealthy region. But what about Mark's mother? Kelsie knew by her attitude that this was far from over. The woman was wary of this strange child who had somehow bewitched her innocent son. Exactly as Kelsie's mother would be.

The woman produced a cell phone and called a number. She said only a few words, but Kelsie felt a chill. Was she notifying the police? If Kelsie was put in a jail cell, she would be unable to return to the park and home, no matter how much time passed. But Mark remained silent, and that seemed good.

A man met them as the car halted at a house in a suburb. He smiled at the woman. That would be Mark's father. He glanced briefly at Kelsie and made no comment. He had to have been the one Mark's mother had called, so he was not surprised by the visitor.

The woman guided her into the house and to a computer. "Mark."

Mark sat down and typed a letter in his language. Kelsie recognized the odd sound-based symbols it used. It was only two sentences long. Then he turned to Kelsie. "Ee-male," he said.

After a confused pause, she realized what it was: an electronic note to her family. To let her parents know she was safe. But they needed her electronic address. Her family did not have a direct one, but there was a local community one that could reach her father.

What could she do? She gave it. Mark typed in the symbols, and sent the note.

That was all. His mother dismissed Mark and took Kelsie to a room that evidently belonged to a girl. Mark's older sister; he had mentioned her as being in college. So her room was vacant. In America they could afford to keep an empty room instead of renting it out; it was part of the richness so many people had here.

The woman rummaged in a closet and produced a dress that was approximately her size. It must date from when his sister was her age. “Jange,” she said. She wanted her to don the dress.

Again, Kelsie had to do it. She removed her own clothing, which was typical of her culture.

Then she saw Mark’s mother looking hard at her body. Oh, no! She had forgotten about the undershirt she was wearing: Mark’s T-shirt. The woman recognized it. Her mouth tightened into a thin line. What must she be thinking? And Kelsie could not even try to explain. She felt herself blushing furiously—and of course that did not help.

The woman said nothing, and seemed to have forgotten it in a moment. But Kelsie knew this was real mischief. She hoped the woman would believe Mark when he explained.

The room had its own little bathroom, with a toilet and shower. That was another American luxury. Kelsie remained somewhat grubby from her soaking, and was glad to get completely clean again.

She dressed, discovering also socks and shoes. Mark’s mother was making sure she was appropriately garbed throughout. This time.

She dried her long dark hair, and was about to braid it when Mark’s mother reappeared. The woman shook her head.

Not braid her hair? Kelsie normally kept it out of the way, in the manner of girls her age. It had never been cut. She had left it braided when she got soaked, as it would have been a mess to handle wet.

The women produced a brush and comb, and brushed the hair until it was straight and even. Kelsie felt a surge of gratitude. If she had not known that this was someone’s mother before, this would have proved it. The woman was treating her exactly as she would her own daughter, and that was very reassuring. When she had it right, she fastened it in place with combs, letting it flow in back. She must have had long experience with Mark’s sister.

She steered Kelsie to a mirror. Kelsie sucked in her breath. She hardly recognized herself. Now she looked just like a western

girl, in the pretty dress, with her hair fluffed out and falling around her shoulders. Well, she was in their culture now.

Mark's mother guided her to rejoin Mark, who did a double-take when he saw her. He said something, but of course she didn't understand it. Except that he was smiling, so it was probably good. "Thank you," she replied. He wouldn't understand the words, but surely could guess their meaning.

The family had a large television receiver. Mark turned it on, and a news program appeared. Then his mother came and put the set into a special mode—and Chinese subtitles formed across the bottom of the screen. Kelsie could read them! There were many Chinese dialects, and it could be hard to understand Cantonese or others, but the written language was the same throughout. This was wonderful! It felt almost like home.

They sat on the couch and watched the news together. Then came an item that electrified her: news of a flash flood in the Beijing area, because of an unexpectedly heavy storm. "Mark!" she exclaimed. "That's what caught me!"

He nodded and said something. He had seen it too.

The man reappeared. Mark introduced her to him, confirming that this was his father. There was a family resemblance. She smiled and bowed politely.

Then it was their dinner time. Kelsie was hungry, but was not accustomed to their forks or manners. She did not know what to do.

Then she saw the set of chopsticks. And the rice. They had made a meal she could handle. Mark must have told them, and his mother had done it. She was so grateful she was almost in tears.

In the evening they watched a motion picture on the television, again with subtitles. It was set in China, and she realized that Mark's mother had arranged this too. They were being perfect hosts. She enjoyed the movie as much for their consideration as for its story.

But there were limits. When the time came for sleeping, Mark's mother presented her with a key to lock her bedroom. She was pretty sure they did trust her, now, but they, too, needed to

honor their society's forms.

Impulsively she kissed the woman on the cheek. Then covered her face, embarrassed. She had surely violated proper manners.

But Mark's mother merely smiled and departed. She clearly understood children. Kelsie was alone for the night.

It was hard for her to settle down in these strange surroundings, after such an adventurous day. But she was tired, and soon enough she slept.

In the morning she showered again, and discovered a new outfit set out for her. Mark's mother must have another key. She donned clothing, fixed her hair, and unlocked the door. It was just dawn.

This was Sunday, widely honored as a day of rest. But there was a certain tension in the house. They might not have believed Mark's explanation about the T-shirt and why she had borrowed it. They could hardly be faulted for that; how could anyone accept the idea of magic and frozen time in a mysterious park?

They had breakfast together. Then there was a family meeting. Kelsie was nervous; now it was coming. They had treated her with perfect respect and courtesy, considering how she had appeared among them, but there were things they needed to deal with.

Mark's father produced the printout of an email. He brought a world globe. He touched the email to the globe, and said something.

"Beijing," Kelsie agreed, seeing where he touched. "My home." They must have received an answer from her family there. They might not have believed she was from the other side of the world, but the note confirmed it.

Still, they were troubled about something. Mark's father talked to Mark, and Mark looked surprised and dismayed. Something was wrong, and Kelsie was sure it related to her.

Mark turned to her. "Pandora Park," he said. The name was the same, because it was a western myth transplanted to her city. The parents must want to see it. Was that possible?

The four of them went there. They stood before the statue while Mark explained about the special path. Kelsie knew that was what he was doing; what else could it be?

Then Mark took her hand, making a show that they were doing this together. They stepped up to the statue, and touched the box together.

The magic path appeared. They turned back to wave to the parents, then set foot on it. They walked to the chocolate ball tree.

Now at last they could talk. “You’re pretty!” Mark exclaimed.

Kelsie was so surprised she forgot whatever she had been about to say. All this magic to explain, and he thought she looked nice in her western clothing?

But then he continued. “I explained about the park, but they didn’t believe. Then the answer came from your folks in Beijing. They are glad to know you found a safe place with a friend out of town, and will expect you back when the flood drains away.”

“Out of town?”

“They don’t seem to realize that you’re in America. My message just told them—”

“Yes, I understand. They would not believe. But your folks know?”

“I told them. They did not believe. They thought you must be from a Chinese section, an—” He faltered.

“An enclave. Where folk from a different land live together.”

“Yes. But now they know you’re not, and they’re starting to realize that I’m telling the truth. So they want to see the magic path.”

“We showed them that just now.”

“Yes. But there’s something else.”

“That made you surprised,” she agreed.

“Dad reminded me that Beijing is on the other side of the world from Albany. When it’s day here, it’s night there. Noon here would be close to midnight there.”

“Yes, of course.”

“So how could you enter the park in the middle of the day,

just as I did, and we meet? We should be twelve hours apart.”

Her jaw dropped. “That’s right! But we’re not. Somehow we align. When one of us enters the park, so does the other. When I left via your entrance, I aligned with your realm. I did not even suffer jet lag.”

“Jet lag!” He laughed. “Sort of the way time freezes outside when we’re inside,” he agreed. “Only it must be more complicated. It seems impossible, but it happens.”

“We must return and tell them that,” she said. “Before they become alarmed by our absence.”

“Yes.” He hesitated. “Mom likes you. She says you kissed her.”

“I did. She treated me so well, considering I’m a stranger.”

“I think she misses my sister. I mean, having a girl in the house. You’re a girl.”

“I’m a girl,” she agreed, smiling.

“Come on.” He headed back down the path.

She followed, shaking her head. They really hadn’t discussed anything important, other than the new mystery of timing. But at least his family would understand about the path.

The parents were waiting there exactly as before. Mark and Kelsie stepped off the path and circled the statue to join them. He said something.

His father said something back. Mark looked confused. Then he took Kelsie by the hand again and led her back to the statue. The magic path had vanished, but reappeared when they touched the box. Why were they doing this again?

They reached the tree. “They weren’t watching,” he said. “They didn’t see us take the path.”

“But they were facing us. They had to have seen us go into the forest.”

“They didn’t. Dad said we never went anywhere.”

Then she realized what the problem was. “Mark—we forgot! Time doesn’t change outside.”

“Sure. I know that. So what?”

“So we returned the same time we left. They never saw us go

because we were back at exactly the same time.”

Now his realization came. “No time! We were just discussing it, and didn’t think how it worked. How can we ever show them, then?”

“It is a paradox. Something that seems to make no sense. We must be outside the park for time to pass, and inside it to show them. Unless they could enter it with us.”

“Somehow I don’t think that will work. It seems to be keyed to just us.”

“Yes. So we must enter without them.”

“I have an idea. Suppose we go across to your entrance, and step out there?”

“But it’s raining so hard we’ll be soaked.”

“That was yesterday. The rain must have stopped by now. We can wait for maybe ten minutes, then return.”

“And that ten minutes will have passed for them,” she agreed. “That’s it!” She stepped toward him.

“Don’t kiss me!” he said.

Indeed, she had been about to. “I apologize. I will try to restrain my impulses.”

They took the scooter and skates and moved rapidly across the park. Soon they were at her entrance. He was correct: the rain had stopped. The flood remained, however; it would be another day or two before it went down.

They stepped out and looked around. There was no local activity. It occurred to her that she might be able to wade through the flood and get home by foot. But there could still be lurking men, and in any event she had agreed to wait until the waters retreated, when her family might come to meet her. That would be best.

After a few minutes they returned to the park. They scooted and skated back through the maze of paths. She still did not know the way; she was glad that Mark had such a good sense of the route.

They reached his entrance and set aside their equipment. “We have been half an hour,” Mark said, glancing at his watch. “Maybe five minutes outside.”

“Now they will have to believe,” she said.

“They’ll have to,” he agreed. “If there’s another problem, we can come back here to talk.”

“That may be best,” she agreed. “I do not enjoy being so long silenced.”

He laughed. “Serves you right for being a girl.”

That annoyed her, but she merely smiled and started walking. He was a boy; he didn’t know any better. He paced her, and soon they were at the statue.

This time the parents were looking, and were not seeing them. Only when they stepped off the end of the path did the man and woman abruptly focus. Then the relief showed on their faces.

Mark’s father came to grab him by the shoulders, and Mark’s mother came to hug Kelsie. There was a babble of dialogue.

Mark turned to face Kelsie. He nodded. Now his folks believed.

Chapter 5: Familiars

“So we just disappeared?” Mark asked. “And reappeared?”

“You did,” his father agreed. “We were afraid you’d never come back.”

“It was only five minutes,” Mark reminded him. “But half an hour by my watch.” He showed the watch, before he reset it to match the mall clock.

“Kelsie doesn’t wear a watch,” his mother said. “I think she needs one.”

“They’re not rich like a lot of Americans,” Mark said. “She doesn’t have things I do.” He felt guilty.

“I have an old watch I’ll give her,” his mother said.

“Her folks might think she stole it.”

She smiled grimly. “I will write them a note she can show them.”

“I think for the time being we shall have to believe in magic,” Mark’s father said as they reached the car. “But I also think we would be well advised to keep this matter between us.”

“Because others would not believe us,” Mark said. “They would think we’re crazy.”

“No. Because they *might* believe us, particularly if they witnessed that disappearing act of yours. Then they could become dangerous.”

“Dangerous, dad?”

“Greed does not stop itself, son. Look at the presidents and top executives of large companies. So many of them receive bonuses worth millions of dollars, yet the people who have to buy

their products are going broke. What would a person like that do if he thought he could control magic?"

Mark considered that. "Mum's the word, dad."

"We like your friend, Mark. She's polite, and from what you say, smart. We're glad to have her as a guest in our house."

"Thanks. She was worried about that."

"But we are concerned. We would like to know who set up that park, and why. I'm sure it seems perfectly safe, but it could be an ugly trap."

"A trap, dad?"

"For children. Maybe you're supposed to get to like it really well, then come out and tell other children about it, so they'll come there in droves. Then when they have hundreds of children, the gates will close and none of you will get out. Pied Piper. That gives us nightmares."

"We're worried too," Mark said. "We talked about it some. But there's no sign of anything really bad." Still, there had been that scaled pig, and the roller coaster that tried to trap them on it. But things like that wouldn't lure children in, so it couldn't be that kind of trap.

"There wouldn't be. We would really prefer that you stay out of that park, Mark. But we know you won't. So we're not forbidding you anything, just expressing our concern. If you get any slightest suspicion, get the hooha out of there."

"We will, dad."

Kelsie's visit continued for two more days. Then she and Mark returned to Pandora Park. It was time for her to go home.

But first Mark's mother gave her the watch and note. Kelsie was confused, but when she understood, she hugged the woman and kissed her on the cheek. All Mark could think of was what would have happened had she done that inside the park. He had a mental picture of his mother floating away, blessed with super strength. He stifled his smirk.

This time they tried an experiment: Kelsie took the path and did not return. Ten minutes later Mark took it.

She was waiting by the chocolate ball tree. "You were

supposed to wait ten minutes,” she told him.

“I did,” he retorted. “See—my watch shows it.”

She looked, then showed him her watch. It showed less than one minute: the time it had taken him to walk the path from the statue to the tree.

No time had passed for her, until he touched the box. They had indeed entered the park together, though at different times outside. “That explains how we could each enter at noon, local time, or even morning and evening, yet be together here,” he said. “It puts us together.”

“I followed the path immediately and got lost,” she agreed. “You must have waited, so caught up to me later.”

“I was experimenting with the scooter,” he agreed. “But the second time I made it all the way over to your entrance before you come in.”

“I was standing there soaking wet, trying to decide whether to go on in.”

“Outside the park?”

“Yes.” She considered. “So you spent time inside it, waiting for me, before I entered. It was not *no* time.”

“Not *no* time,” he agreed. “We don’t yet know all the ways of it. Still, we’re always together before long. One of us never comes in without the other being there too, soon. That must mean something.”

“Yes. But what?”

“My folks fear it’s a trap for children. Maybe to let word get around, so more children come, then catch them all.”

“Like a honey trap for ants,” she agreed. “It waits until there are a lot of them, then strikes.”

“But it seems pretty fancy for that. Why not just have a huge pile of candy in the center, that would attract hundreds of children right away? Why bother with magic, and time alignments, and many paths?”

“I don’t know. Maybe it’s set up for a special kind of child, and we’re that kind. It wants more like us, rather than just any kids who come by.” She swallowed nervously. “I think we should both

leave, and never return.”

“Are you going to do that?”

“No.”

“Because you can’t stay away from the magic.”

She considered. “That, too.”

He was surprised. “There is something else?”

She fidgeted a moment, then answered. “I don’t want to lose your friendship, Mark.”

He stared at her. “But we hardly know each other!”

“You were nice to me. You understand, and not just about the magic. And your family—I like them too.”

Mark thought about that. “Are you saying you want to be my—my girlfriend?”

“No! Just your friend.”

“Oh. Okay. Just friends.” But seeing her as she stood there, with her hair nicely done, and in the pretty dress his mother had provided, he realized that he wouldn’t mind having her as a girlfriend. When they were old enough.

“I have to get home,” she said. “But I will come here again. If you don’t want to meet me, all you have to do is stay out of the park.”

“I’ll meet you,” he said. “I’ll shake on that.” He put out his hand.

“But that will make you tell the truth!”

“I know.”

They shook hands. “I’ll meet you,” he repeated.

She looked as if she wanted to hug him or kiss him, but she refrained. “Thank you.” There was a tear in her eye.

They crossed to her entrance. He walked out with her. The floodwaters had receded, and the streets were almost dry again.

Two people stood by the statue. “We’d better wait until they’re gone,” Mark said. “It would attract attention if you just appeared from nowhere.”

“Those are my parents!” she exclaimed, delighted. “They came!”

He had forgotten about that. Dad had said he would send

another email to tell them when Kelsie would return. “Good enough. I’ll go back now.”

“No, you must meet them,” she insisted, taking his hand. And he discovered that when she did that, he had to do what she wanted.

“Kelsie, you’ve got another talent,” he said. “You can lead people. By taking their hands.”

She was surprised. “I did not know. But I’m glad. You would not come on your own.” She hauled him on to the statue, and off the path.

The moment they were off it, the pull stopped. The magic was gone. But she was already flinging herself into her mother’s arms.

The man faced Mark, and made a little formal bow. “Thank you,” he said in English. It was very formal, but Mark had no trouble understanding it.

Mark returned the bow, somewhat awkwardly. “You’re welcome.” He hadn’t realized that Kelsie’s father could speak his language.

“Your father sent email. We did not believe. But then we believed. And it is true. But we will not tell others.”

“I understand,” Mark said. “We won’t either.”

That was it. He knew that Kelsie would explain as much as she could to her folks, and that they would let her visit the park again. They were understanding people, she had told him. As were his own parents. It probably wasn’t just chance that they both had parents like that.

Mark bowed again, and went to the statue. Kelsie did not make any impulsive gestures; she was being a proper Chinese girl, so as not to make her parents lose face. But she smiled at him.

He touched the box and stepped on the path. He looked back, and saw the three of them looking somewhat blankly past the statue. They could no longer see him.

Now he was alone in the park. How could that be, if he and Kelsie were always in it together? Oh, yes; it was the same way it had been when Kelsie entered the park before him: no time had

passed for her. Now it was probably passing for her but not for him. Or for him and not for her. Somehow. It was confusing, so he let it be.

He returned to his own entrance, and stepped off the path. Dad and mom were still waiting. Only a few minutes had passed for them—the time he had spent outside the park in Beijing.

“Is she safe?” his mother asked, concerned.

“Sure, mom. I met her folks; they were there to meet her. Her dad speaks English.”

“Yes. He answered my email.”

“She likes you,” he said. “Especially mom.”

“She likes you too,” his mother said.

“She’s a likable girl,” his father said.

That about covered it. Mark returned to the home summer routine, but his thoughts were constantly on Pandora Park. And on Kelsie. He realized that it was true for him too: the park fascinated him, but he also wanted to see her again.

There was another thing: he found a wooden sword and practiced moves with it. He wanted to be able to fend off a magic sword if he had to. Just in case.

Next Saturday his mother took him to the mall again. “If something happens and you can’t get back, have Kelsie tell her parents to contact us,” she said.

He realized that she was more worried than she had let on. “I will, mom.”

“I will return in an hour. If you are not here—”

“I’ll be here, mom!” he said quickly.

She nodded, not entirely satisfied. He knew she had discussed it with his father, and they were letting him go, but that there was some real fear in the background. He could not be sure it wasn’t justified. That scaly pig monster, the roller coaster that wouldn’t stop, the general mystery of it—fascinating, but also maybe dangerous.

He touched the box and stepped on the path. He looked back. His mother was already turning away, having seen him vanish. He felt a sudden surge of love for her. She was letting him have his

experience, so he could learn and grow, but she was hurting. That made him feel proud and guilty.

He crossed the park, and found Kelsie waiting for him. He didn't ask when she had entered the park, in her time; that no longer really mattered.

She stepped up, took his hand, and hugged and kissed him before he could protest. Actually he couldn't protest once she had his hand; his willpower faded. He became very strong, and floated. She laughed.

"You did that on purpose!" he said.

"It's my nature." But she looked a bit smug as he grabbed on to a tree branch to stop himself from floating entirely away. Meanwhile she was unbraiding her hair and fixing it the way Mark's mother had fixed it. She had even brought along the special combs. She was not in China anymore.

"I need a rope or something, to hold me to the ground," he said.

"Find one."

He looked around, and spotted a ten foot long electric cord. That would have to do.

She fetched it, and reached up to tie it to his left ankle. Then she walked along the path, hauling him along like a balloon. "You wouldn't like it if you were the one in the air," he said, annoyed. He caught at a stout upper branch, and broke it in half bare-handed.

She hauled him down to the ground. "We need to find out about this park," she said. "So we know whether it's safe."

"How can we do that?"

"Maybe by seeking its limits. Like wishing for something really outrageous."

"It doesn't grant wishes."

"Doesn't it? When you look for something, isn't that a wish?"

He realized it was true. "What should I look for?"

She considered. "Two years ago I saw a Western movie. They come to China, with subtitles; we can see most of them, even if they are bootleg."

“Bootleg! You mean pirated?”

She nodded. “Stolen, really. I do not say it is right. But there are copies of many things, not merely your computer software. There are stores in Beijing that look almost like Western chain stores your mother showed me, but little of what they sell is legal. They even copy the brand names, to make them look authentic.”

“Isn’t there some law enforcement?”

She shrugged. “There should be. But it happens.”

Mark was amazed. A whole industry in fakes! “You were telling me about a movie you saw.”

“Yes. It was fantasy, and it had a unicorn. It was like a horse with a horn, and it was the most beautiful thing I ever saw. I loved it instantly.”

“But unicorns don’t exist! They’re myths.”

“That is true. That is their advantage. A horse must be housed, fed, exercised; it is expensive to maintain. But a unicorn costs nothing; it will take care of itself, and just be there when you want it. I want it.”

“How could I ever find an imaginary creature?”

“That is the challenge. Perhaps it will be beyond the power of this park to provide. Then we will know a limit.”

Mark wasn’t sure of her reasoning, but he was ready to try. “Hold me down, and I’ll look for a unicorn. A big bold stallion with a mighty horn.”

“Thank you.”

They set out along a new path. There were many shrubs and trees, most bearing candies of different types, but they weren’t interested in those. In fact, the landscape was rather dull. “Why all the paths, if there’s nothing special there?” he asked.

“Perhaps it is nothing, until we look for something.”

He didn’t quite understand that either. “Unicorn,” he said. “I want a unicorn.”

Then they came to a glade. There stood a horse with a horn. “Oh!” Kelsie cried, delighted. She ran toward it, hauling Mark along behind her.

Then things went wrong. First, it wasn’t a magnificent

stallion; it was a small mare with a stubby horn. Second, it shied away from Kelsie.

“She’s not tame,” Mark said, catching on.

“Surely so,” Kelsie agreed hopefully.

The unicorn circled around Kelsie and came to Mark, who was settling to earth. She lowered her head and touched the ground at his feet with her horn.

She was approaching him? This was weird. He remained quite light, and was sure that enough super strength remained to fend off the unicorn if he needed to. So he slowly put out his right hand and touched her mane. “Nice unicorn,” he said.

She lifted her head and looked him in the eye. “Thank you, master.”

Mark almost somersaulted backward. “Did that animal talk?” he asked.

“Yes,” Kelsie said. “She called you master. That mean’s she’s your unicorn. You stole her from me!”

“Not so,” the unicorn said. “I chose him.”

“But you were my dream,” Kelsie protested.

“Too bad for you. I am Mark’s familiar.”

“My what?” he asked.

“Familiar. A magic spirit in the form of an animal, staying with a person, to help him or her do magic.”

“I don’t know anything about unicorns,” Mark protested. “Please, go with Kelsie.”

“I will not touch her,” the unicorn said stoutly.

Kelsie recovered from her annoyance. “So what am I supposed to do? Take his familiar?”

“Yes,” the unicorn said. “Because you can’t have me.”

Kelsie looked at Mark. “What’s your dream animal?”

“That’s easy. A dragon. Big, with wings, and breathing fire.”

“Find it,” she said tightly.

“So you can take it?”

“So we can trade.”

“You can’t trade,” the unicorn said.

Mark shrugged. “Okay, I’ll find my dragon.” He untied the

cord, because enough weight had returned so he could stay on the ground. He walked on along the path.

“Why don’t you ride me?” the unicorn asked.

“You’re not supposed to be mine. Besides, I don’t know how to ride a horse.”

“I’m magic. You’ll stay on. I’ll take you anywhere, fast.”

“What about Kelsie? How can she keep up?”

“Who cares about her? Leave her behind.”

“I care about her,” Mark said hotly. “I won’t leave her behind.”

“What a pain in the ankles. So I’ll walk.”

“I don’t even know your name.”

“I thought you’d never ask. Just call me Witch.”

“Witch? What kind of a name is that?”

She swished her tail impatiently. “What’s wrong with it?”

“It means an ugly old woman who lives in a house made of candy and tries to lure children inside so she can bake them in her oven.” Then Mark made a connection. “Kelsie! We’d better get out of here!”

But Kelsie was perplexed. “It’s just a name.”

“Don’t you know the story of the two children in the woods? The witch uses the candy to get them. Pandora Park is like a candy house. And here’s the witch, making herself look like a unicorn. We don’t dare enter her house!”

“Ridiculous,” Witch said. “I don’t want to eat you. I’m a herbivore.”

“A what?”

“She eats grass,” Kelsie said. “Not meat.”

“What side are you on?”

“I just know that my unicorn couldn’t hurt anyone.”

“I’m not your unicorn!” Witch said. “And I’ll spear anyone who threatens my master.”

“I still don’t trust this,” Mark said.

“Why don’t I hug you again? Then you’ll be strong enough to handle anything.”

“Good idea.”

Kelsie hugged him, and he felt the strength spread through his body.

“I’d hug you too, if I had arms,” Witch said jealously.

Then Mark saw the dragon slithering toward them. It wasn’t exactly what he had been looking for, but then, what he found never was. It was like a big snake with many coils, and a huge feathery head. “Look.”

“That’s a Chinese dragon!” Kelsie said.

“I wanted an American dragon.”

“Don’t be fussy,” Witch said. “You can’t have him anyway. Give him to her.”

“Take him,” Mark said with resignation.

“If I’d wanted a regular Chinese dragon, I’d have asked for one,” Kelsie said.

“What kind of a welcome is that?” the dragon asked. “Of *course* you want a Chinese dragon. The western ones are fakes.”

“Another talking animal,” Mark muttered.

The dragon ignored him and went to Kelsie. “What a lovely girl. I’ll be glad to be your familiar. What’s your name? My name is Wizard.”

“But a wizard is a sorcerer,” Kelsie protested.

“So? I can do some magic. But first you have to tell me your name, and accept me as your familiar.”

“I’m Kelsie,” she said. “But I don’t want a familiar.”

“Now be reasonable, Kelsie. I can’t help you if you don’t accept me. That’s the way it is.”

“I haven’t accepted the unicorn either,” Mark said. “I just want to get the hooha out of here.”

Witch turned to him. “What was that word?”

“My father said it. It’s a, a—”

“Euphemism,” Kelsie said. “For the western bad place.”

“This isn’t a bad place,” Witch said. “It’s a good place. An ideal place. You’ll really like it.”

“I just want to get out of here,” Mark said. “Are you coming, Kelsie?”

“Yes. I agree with your father. There’s something wrong

here.”

They linked hands and started walking back along the path.

Suddenly both the unicorn and the dragon were before them, blocking the way. “Don’t go,” Witch said. “We do want you to stay, but it’s not what you think.”

“We think it’s a trap,” Mark said. “For children.”

The unicorn and dragon exchanged a glance. “It’s not working,” Wizard said. “They’re not buying it.”

“I told you it wouldn’t work, you toasted snake. It’s your fault.”

“Listen, you horned nag—”

“Don’t argue,” Kelsie said quickly. “We just don’t need familiars. We want to go home.”

“We can’t stop you,” Wizard said. “But we wish you would listen to our side.”

“Why should we trust you?” Mark asked.

“Because you will recognize the truth when you hear it,” Witch said.

Mark had an idea. “Maybe we should shake hands and agree to listen,” he told Kelsie.

Her eyes widened with understanding. “We will listen,” she told Wizard. “Deal?” She extended her hand.

“Deal,” the dragon agreed, bringing out a front foot. They shook hands, in their fashion.

Which meant Wizard would have to tell the truth. Now for Witch. “Deal?” he asked.

“Deal,” she agreed, lifting her right front hoof.

Mark took it and shook it. His magic wouldn’t make her tell the truth, but that was all right, because the dragon would, and that was the one they would believe. They were about to find out what all this was about. Maybe.

Chapter 6: Wizard

“We will tell you the truth,” Wizard said. “But we can’t do it ourselves. We can only tell you yes or no, for now. You have encountered some of the special ways that exist; this is one that is imposed on us.”

This was a curious challenge! It was as though this were a game, with set rules. But Kelsie had always been good at games. In fact she had won a prize for her age playing the great game of enclosure, Go. She could handle word games too. “Then we’ll ask you questions,” she agreed. She glanced at Mark. “Do you want to start?”

“I just want to know what’s going on,” Mark said. “I don’t know what questions to ask except that, and I don’t think yes or no will work.”

“Then I will try,” Kelsie said. She looked at Witch. “Are you really a unicorn?”

“No, she is not,” Wizard answered.

“Why didn’t Witch answer?” Mark asked.

There was no answer. He had not phrased it correctly.

Kelsie tried. “Can you answer me, Witch?”

“No,” Wizard said.

Kelsie was surprised. “She can’t answer me at all!”

“Yes,” the dragon agreed.

“But she talked to you before,” Mark said.

“Only to tell me to stay away from her,” Kelsie said. “That’s not the same as answering a question about her. Is it?”

“Yes, it is not the same,” Wizard answered.

“You can answer me, Wizard?”

“Yes.”

“And you can’t answer Mark?”

“Yes.”

Then she got an idea. “Does this relate to why I couldn’t have the unicorn?”

“Yes.”

“And Mark couldn’t have the dragon?”

“Yes.”

“So you are not really animals,” Kelsie concluded. “Then you must be human people.”

“Yes.”

She got another idea. “You are children, like us!”

“Yes.”

“A boy and a girl?”

“Yes.”

“And the boy can’t answer the boy, or the girl the girl.”

“Yes.”

“You’re good,” Mark said admiringly. “I never thought of that.”

“I do have a certain feel for it,” Kelsie said, pleased. “But we haven’t come to the tough answers yet.”

“Like what’s going on with the park,” he agreed.

“So you’re children, like us,” Kelsie said to Wizard. “Only with unusual powers. You chose these forms so you could get close to us.”

“Yes.”

“Really good,” Mark said.

“Because we asked for them,” Kelsie said. “I wanted a unicorn, and Mark wanted a dragon.”

“Yes. This gave us a way to be directly with you.”

“Why didn’t they just come to us in their natural forms?” Mark asked. “We thought we were the only children in the park.”

There was no answer. He still wasn’t phrasing it correctly.

“You couldn’t,” Kelsie said.

“Yes,” Wizard agreed.

“Why?” Mark asked. “Are you locked in a cell or something?”

“No,” Witch answered. “We are forbidden.”

So they could add some to it, once the right question had been asked and answered. Still, this was odd. Kelsie knew the dragon had to tell the truth, because of her handshake, but the unicorn didn’t. So she asked Wizard. “Is this true?”

“Yes.”

“So someone has forbidden you?”

“No,” Wizard said.

“It must be complicated.”

“Yes.”

“Something forbids you.”

“Yes.”

“Pandora Park!” Mark explained.

“The park has rules about what you can and can’t do?” Kelsie asked.

“Yes.”

“And the girl can’t help the girl, or the boy the boy?”

“Yes.”

This continued curious. It seemed more natural for girls to relate to girls. What could account for such a restriction? For the moment Kelsie was stumped for the right question.

“What do they want with us?” Mark asked.

What, indeed! A tingle of nervousness hovered somewhere along Kelsie’s spine. “You want something from us.”

“Yes.”

“But you can’t tell us what.”

“Yes, we can’t.”

“It must be something really bad,” Mark said.

“No,” Witch answered.

“Something good?” Kelsie asked.

There was no answer.

Kelsie exchanged another glance with Mark. Something neither good nor bad? She didn’t trust this.

“There must be something we can do, that they can’t,” Mark

said.

“Yes,” Witch answered.

He looked at her, surprised. “You mean I had a yes or no question?”

“Yes. A yes-no comment, anyway.”

“What can’t you do?” he asked.

Again there was no answer.

“The park limits you,” Kelsie said.

“Yes,” Wizard answered.

“And it says Witch can’t talk to me, just to Mark.”

“Yes.”

Kelsie got an idea. “So you made a deal with Witch! You’re helping her, and she’s helping you. That’s how you’re getting around it.”

“Yes!” the two said together.

“You want us to take your places!” Mark exclaimed.

“Yes!”

“But we’re already here in the park,” Kelsie said. And this time she received no answer.

“What are they doing here?” Mark asked.

There was a lead, if only she could phrase it correctly. “Are you trapped here?” Kelsie asked.

Wizard struggled. “Not exactly. Yes and no.”

“You can’t leave unless we take your places?”

“Yes. But you have to want to.”

“How did you come here?” Mark asked. But of course they couldn’t answer that.

Still, it gave Kelsie another notion. “You took the places of two other children!”

“Yes.”

“And they had taken the places of others before them?”

“Yes.”

“How far back does that go?” Mark asked, surprised.

Kelsie knew she would have to track this down step by step. “The number of children, or couples, who have been here—is it three sets?”

“No.”

“Four?”

“No.”

“Ten or more?”

“Yes.”

“How many years?” Mark asked.

“More than ten years?” Kelsie asked.

“Yes.”

“More than a hundred years?”

“Yes. We think.”

Ah. “Since around the year 1900, approximately?”

“Yes, we think.”

“But there wasn’t anything, way back then,” Mark said. “No cell phones, no TV, no airplanes. Did they even have cars?”

“Yes, some,” Witch answered him.

“The industrial revolution!” Mark exclaimed.

“Yes.”

He hadn’t even been asking a question, but he had gotten an answer. It was like his talent: he was not finding exactly what he sought, but he was getting there.

“But Pandora Park is magic,” Kelsie said.

Wizard hesitated. “Not exactly.”

Now this was interesting. What could he mean?

“I read somewhere that advanced science can’t be told from magic,” Mark said. “Three-D images are just like illusion images. A picture phone is like a magic mirror. If they could stop gravity, it would be like a flying carpet.”

“Yes,” Witch agreed.

Kelsie had never heard that, but it made sense. Mark had scored again. “So the park is really advanced science?”

“Yes,” Wizard said. “It does have antigravity, and a whole lot more.”

Kelsie concentrated. “So Pandora Park was set up when the industrial revolution came. Humans couldn’t have done it; we weren’t advanced enough.”

“Yes.”

“But who else?”

“We don’t know.”

“Aliens!” Mark said.

“We don’t know,” Witch said. “It’s just here. We have never seen anyone except the children we replaced, and the visitors after us.”

“Visitors?” Kelsie asked. “Before us? Other children?”

“Yes and yes,” Witch agreed. “Two at a time, always, a boy and a girl. I can talk only with the boy, and Wizard only with the girl. Because the girl might replace me, and the boy would replace him. We don’t know why that’s a rule, but we can’t break it.”

“Beats me,” Mark said. “Why doesn’t the park make it easy for you to find kids to take your place? Obviously it wants two children here to enjoy it.”

But Kelsie was able to answer that. “It wants smart, open-minded children; those are the only kind it lets in. And it must be still testing them, to see how well they cooperate or tackle a challenge. So Wizard can’t get his replacement without cooperating with Witch.”

“That must be it,” Wizard said. “But we’re cooperating to get away from the park, so we won’t matter anyway. It’s the two of you it should be testing.”

“It surely is,” Kelsie agreed. “But in a way we haven’t yet understood.”

“But if it’s aliens, why should they care about what we’re like?” Mark asked. “Just so long as we run the park okay.”

He had come up with another good question. “There must be more to this than we know,” Kelsie said. “Can you tell us what your lives here are like, now that we have learned that you would like us to take over?”

“This is Heaven,” Wizard said. “We can do anything except leave. We can eat anything and never get full, play all day and night and never get tired, and we never get older. We can do any kind of magic, like flying or conjuring or changing forms. Do you want to see our natural forms?”

“You can really be any form you want, any time?” Kelsie

asked.

The dragon shrugged, which was a good trick. “Sure.”

“And do any kind of magic, including what we do?” Mark asked.

“Yes,” Witch answered. “Of course we each have our own ways of invoking it. I’m better at some things, and Wizard at others. It’s the same for the two of you, as you must have noticed.” She floated a yard off the ground, did a slow somersault in the air, and lay down as if on an invisible sofa. She tapped her front hooves together, and bright sparks flew out. She blew, and a dark purple cloud formed, swirled, and shaped itself into a small unicorn replica. “Anything. What you have is only a sample. You can have it all, if you stay here. All you have to do is discover it, bit by bit, as you have been doing.”

So much magic! Kelsie found that tempting. But there was a lot more she needed to know about this. “Please do take your natural forms.”

Suddenly the dragon and unicorn were gone, and in their places stood a tousle-haired boy of about eleven and a pig-tailed girl of about ten. Wizard and Witch, as they called themselves. They looked absolutely ordinary, in shorts and a school dress. Kelsie thought they might be European, but didn’t want to ask lest it be a private matter.

“Seems like fun to me,” Mark said. “Why do you want to leave? Can you give a straight answer, or do we have to play more twenty questions?”

“We can answer, now that we have gotten this far,” Witch said. “We thought we’d never get tired of this park; that’s why we signed up. We thought the children we replaced were somehow defective, because a *real* child should never tire of candyland, amusement park, and magic all rolled into one. But they had been through it, and knew what we have since learned: fun isn’t fun forever. After a while you get enough of it, and it gets dull. Then you want to move on—and you can’t.”

“Move on?” Mark asked. Kelsie wondered too. Why weren’t they trying to make the park as inviting as possible, so as to

persuade their replacements?

“We never get older, as Wizard said. That’s more like a curse than a blessing. I want to know what it’s like to become a woman, to fall in love, suffer heartbreak, get married, and maybe have children of my own. That will never happen here. I’ll never have a real life here.”

Kelsie hadn’t thought of it that way before. She liked being a child, but she didn’t want to stay that way forever. “And you can’t just walk out of the park, and lose the magic?”

“We can and we can’t,” Wizard said. “We tried it once, and came back.”

“I don’t understand. Why can’t you leave, and why do you need us to take your places?”

“Two reasons,” Wizard said. “I’ll give one. When we left, there was a tug at our souls. We hated leaving the park. It was as if we were deserting our best friend, and it was dying. We just couldn’t stay away. That’s when we knew that there had to be replacements. The park needs children to live in it and use it. We’re really caretakers, keeping it alive in its way. We can’t leave until we know there’re two more children to keep it happy. That’s why the children before us didn’t leave.”

“But you left your families,” Kelsie said. “Didn’t that hurt?”

Wizard looked at Witch. “It’s not quite the same. We never truly appreciated our families before we came here. We thought they were dull and demanding, and that we were mostly in their way.”

Now Kelsie looked at Mark. This was eerily similar to the way they felt, though they really knew better. “It wasn’t true.”

“Yes. But here’s the difference: the other children took our places. They assumed our lives. So we knew our families didn’t miss us. We could stay here and really be doing them a favor.”

“A favor!” Mark exclaimed. “Running away from home?”

“Now it’s my turn,” Witch said grimly. “We stayed here two years before we got really fed up with, well, childishness. We had every kind of amusement to distract us, but we spent much of our time arguing with each other. We finally dared each other to leave,

and we did leave, each going to our own homes. That was awful.”

“Awful?” Mark asked. “Your folks should have been glad to see you.”

“No they weren’t. First you have to understand something. When we visited Pandora Park, time stood still, inside and out, as you must have noticed. That was weird but sort of fun.”

Both Mark and Kelsie nodded.

“But when we agreed to take over, to become the park’s residents, and the other children left, time resumed. Time freezes for visitors, so as to give them a chance to find out what’s it’s all about without changing anything. Then it resumes, and the same time passes inside and outside. We don’t know how the park manages that, but it does. The park has its own rules and ways, and we can’t change them. We can only change the way we invoke the magic, not the magic itself. So when we went out, it was two years later.”

“Still, your folks wouldn’t have forgotten you,” Mark said. “They must have been crazy with worry, thinking you’d been kidnapped or something.”

“No. Because when the other children took over our lives, they came to look and act exactly like us. No one knew the difference—not even our families. Only they were better. They understood what a waste it is to be forever childish, and were very serious about making the very best of their lives—*our* lives—they could. They were perfect, never quarreling, always doing their homework and their chores, always being nice and thoughtful. They really had adult pers—per—”

“Perspectives,” Kelsie said. “Or more properly, adult attitudes. The mature way of looking at things.”

Witch looked at Wizard. “Tell her thank you.”

“She thanks you,” Wizard said. “She can’t do it directly. Park rules. She can only talk directly to Mark.”

“Tell her she’s welcome,” Kelsie said with a smile.

“Language,” Mark said. “Unless they were from the same parts of the world you are, they would have not been able to speak your language outside. What about that?”

“There does seem to be some magic outside the park,” Witch said. “They were not from our areas, but when they went there, they spoke our languages. They also recognized our few friends, and treated them well. They were very good at being us. Better than we had been, really.”

“They must have been changed to fit,” Mark said. “So they were magically given your appearance, language, and memories. That’s scary.”

“It remains scary,” Witch agreed, smiling at him.

Kelsie found it unsettling, the way the girl oriented on Mark. But she gave no sign.

“We saw that,” Wizard continued, “and knew that those perfect children were making our families happy in a way we never had. Or could. We were normal children. We fussed and skipped out on chores and were thoughtless. We might try to be better, but we knew it just wasn’t in us to be perfect. Also, if we came back, the other children would still be there—two years older. That would double the burden on our families. There would be complicated things to explain. It just wouldn’t work.”

Kelsie nodded. “Now I think I see it. Your families were happy with the children they thought were you. If you joined them, you would just mess things up.”

“Yes!” Witch said. “Tell, her, Wiz.”

“I heard,” Kelsie said. “I understand. I think Mark does too.”

“I sure do,” Mark agreed. “You loved your families. That’s why you couldn’t go back to them, because that would hurt them.”

“Exactly. So we returned to the park. It needed us, and our families didn’t. We cried. Well, I did.”

“She’s being kind,” Wizard said. “I did too. It was an awful discovery.”

“That’s when we knew that the only way we could leave here was to find replacements, and take over their lives,” Witch said. “The same way the children we replaced took over our lives outside. So both the park and the families would be happy.”

Both Kelsie and Mark froze with horror. “Take over our lives?” Mark said numbly.

“Your families would not suffer,” Witch said. “We were children when we came, and still children two years later. But now it is ten years later, and we have come to truly appreciate what it means to have normal lives. We would be perfect children, and never give them cause for grief. Believe me; we know how precious normal life is, now.”

“But you wouldn’t be *us*,” Mark protested.

Witch met his gaze evenly. “Would you go home and always take out the garbage, always wash behind your ears, never get behind on school assignments, never keep bad company, welcome visits to the doctor, and never say anything untrue? *I* would. Believe me. I remain a child only in body and brain; my soul longs for responsibility. I want to *grow up*. It’s the same for Wizard.”

Mark looked uncomfortable. Witch had set an impossible standard.

“And which do you really think your folks would prefer,” she continued grimly. “You—or a “Mark” acting like you, only made perfect?”

Mark remained stunned. Kelsie understood; she was stunned herself. Their families would be better off with such perfect children.

“Now you know,” Witch continued. “We can’t take your places without your agreement. It has to be a fair exchange with everything clearly understood. That’s why we’re telling you the truth; it’s not just the handshakes. The park won’t let us lie to you.”

There was a brief silence. “We have to think about this,” Kelsie said. The very idea of letting others take their places in their families bothered her, yet she could see that it was a fair deal. What would be best for their families?

“Take all the time you want,” Wizard said. “We have made our case.” Then he and Witch vanished.

“Let’s get somewhere private,” Mark said tightly.

She knew what he meant. They could not trust any part of Pandora Park. The two other children had demonstrated enough magic so that they surely had the power to be invisible, or otherwise spy on anything she and Mark might say. “My place or yours?”

“Yours is closer.”

They found their scooter and skates, and moved rapidly to her entrance. Then they stepped outside, and just beyond the statue of Pandora. Now they could talk.

Kelsie was really confused. She had no idea what was best. She hoped Mark was better prepared.

Chapter 7: Challenge

Mark hated to seem unreasonable, but one thing was clear to him. “I can’t do it.”

Kelsie gazed blankly at him.

Oops, he had forgotten: they couldn’t talk outside, because he spoke English and she spoke Chinese. They would have to risk the fringe.

He guided her back to the end of the path and repeated his statement.

Kelsie looked oddly relieved. “Can’t make their deal?”

“Right. I know I’m not the perfect child, but letting a fake take over for me—I just can’t do it, no matter how good he is.”

She smiled and kissed him. “Neither can I.”

Mark was half surprised to discover that he didn’t mind her kiss at all. It was her way of showing perfect understanding and acceptance. He was relieved to have her agreement; he had feared she would argue.

Then he realized that he wasn’t floating. “Say—you kissed me, but—”

“I stopped it,” she said. “Just to be sure I can. I don’t *have* to do magic.”

“Oh. Okay.” He was glad to know it. “So what now?”

“I think this is beyond us to decide. We need adult understanding.”

“How can we get that? We’re just kids.”

“My parents.”

“But they—” He stalled.

“They would be the hosts for the new girl. They should have a say in the matter, shouldn’t they?”

“But the deal is that the parents don’t know.”

“Whose deal?”

That stopped him. Did they have to follow the rules set down by the other children? That was part of what bothered him about this business. The other children had no future in Pandora Park; they were limited. He did not want to be. “But would they understand?”

“Would yours?”

“I think so. They’re pretty reasonable.”

“They are the people who made us and raised us. We derive our qualities from them. Only they have more experience than we do.”

It made sense. Mature parents, mature children. “We’d better tell them and ask them. But you’ll have to do it.”

“Father speaks English.”

“Oh, that’s right. Still, it’s your family.”

She nodded. “Shall we go?”

He hesitated. “Now?”

“What other time?”

“Now,” he agreed. But his knees felt weak.

She led him past the statue and into the city. Mark felt horribly nervous. If anyone talked to him, he wouldn’t be able to answer. He would depend entirely on Kelsie.

Just as she had depended on him, when she visited his family. She had trusted him. Now he trusted her.

It was a fair walk through the city, but an interesting one. There were stores with signs galore, in Chinese characters. They looked a lot like American stores, except for that. The people, too, looked pretty much like Americans, except that they were Chinese. This could be a Chinese section of his own town. He thought he should be noticing more about it, but he was distracted by his concern about her parents’ reaction to what she told them. He was a little afraid of their maturity.

Kelsie’s family lived in a suburb that to Mark’s

inexperienced eye was distinguished from his own neighborhood mainly by the number of bicycles. The Chinese used bikes rather than cars, and they were everywhere.

“But won’t your folks be off at work?” he asked, before remembering (again) that she couldn’t understand him.

But it turned out that both parents were home. He was doing what looking like computer programming, and she was proofreading documents. They didn’t have to go into an office to do such work.

They welcomed Kelsie, who of course had not been gone long at all—only the time it took to walk home. They were polite to Mark.

Then Kelsie started talking in Chinese, and they got deadly serious. She was putting it to them: suppose another child came to take her place, a perfect child who looked just like her and had an extremely positive attitude?

The reaction took no time at all: No. They did not want that. They wanted her exactly as she was, flaws and all.

Kelsie spoke again. He knew she was asking: Then what should they do?

Both parents spoke seriously. Were they forbidding her to go to Pandora Park again? But she looked surprised, and gratified. Then she kissed them both, and turned to Mark. She took his hand: come.

They walked back to the park. When they were on the path, Mark’s curiosity burst out. “What did they say?”

“They say we should do it,” she said excitedly. “We should take over Pandora Park, and find out what it’s all about. Without really leaving home.”

What did she have in mind? “But time will resume.”

“Yes. That’s good.”

“But Wizard and Witch have nowhere to go.”

“We shall see.”

Confused, he let it drop.

They passed the candy tree. “Wizard! Witch!” she called.

The two appeared, in their natural forms. “Did you decide?”

Wizard asked.

“Not yet. First we have to return your lives to you.”

“We explained about that. Your families—”

“No. You won’t take our families.”

He looked at her, confused. “Where, then? We don’t want foster homes.”

“Your own families.”

“But the children before us have them.”

“First, let me explain how parents are, from a good source. They love their children, with all their faults. They don’t want perfect substitutes. They love you for your bad ways as much as your good ones. They want you back.”

“That can’t be,” Wizard protested. “They don’t even know we’re gone.”

“Consider it this way,” Kelsie said earnestly. “Suppose you could have parents exactly like yours, only perfect? Pretend parents crafted to be everything you ever wanted. So that you wouldn’t even know the difference, except for the fact that they’re actors rather than your real ones?”

Both Wizard and Witch reacted with horror. “We’d rather have our real ones,” Wizard said. “We want real parents and real lives, even if they’re not our own ones. That’s what we have learned in the past decade: our true desire. We want to have the frustrations and pain along with the joy. That’s what reality is.”

“That’s exactly how real parents feel about perfect children,” Kelsie said. “Yours too; we’re sure of it.”

“But—”

“We want to go to each of your families, tell them the truth, and ask them to take you back. Those other children will be twenty or twenty one now, going to college or jobs, maybe even married. Out of the house. There’s room for you.”

Wizard shook his head. “Why would they want to go through the chore of raising teens again?”

“Let’s ask them. I think you’ll be surprised.”

Wizard and Witch exchanged a glance. “We can try it. We have nothing to lose if they say no.”

“And everything to gain if they say yes,” Mark said. “I’m sure my folks would feel the same, and yours will too. They are extremely understanding parents. You just have to give them a chance.”

“It’s a dream,” Witch said, hope dawning. Mark remembered that hope was what remained last in Pandora’s box.

“We’ll go with you,” Kelsey said. “But you’ll have to talk to them yourselves, unless their languages match ours.”

“They don’t,” Wizard said.

“I need to check with my folks,” Mark said. “But I think they’ll agree to let me take over Pandora Park, if I don’t leave them. To make it my day job, as it were. So it depends on how it works out with your folks.”

“We need to think about this,” Witch said. “Let’s talk again tomorrow.”

“Sure.”

Mark scooted toward his entrance, and Kelsie went with him on her skates. He looked at his watch. “I’ll talk to them, and come back here as soon as I can.”

She looked at her watch, which his mother had given her. “I’ll go too.”

“You don’t need to.”

“We’re in this together,” she said as they paused by the chocolate ball tree. “If you can’t do it, I won’t either.”

He really appreciated that. He surprised her, and himself, by imitating her: he kissed her impulsively on the cheek.

She floated.

They both stared, astonished. Then Mark caught her foot before she floated away, looking to the side so as not to see up her leg. “I can do it too,” he said.

“Maybe I can find things too,” she said. “We thought we had different types of magic.”

“Maybe it’s a fluke. Maybe I should hug you, to see if it makes you strong.”

“Yes,” she agreed faintly.

He pulled her down and hugged her. Then he let her go. She

caught a branch to hold herself down, stooped to pick up a rock, and squeezed it with one hand.

The rock fractured as if hit by a sledgehammer. She had the super strength.

“Well, Wizard and Witch said they had all kinds of magic,” Mark said, still amazed. “I guess we do too.”

“Just don’t slap me.”

Mark considered that. Then he started to laugh. She laughed with him. Slaps made some of their clothing—and scales—fall off. They really were two of a kind.

Then they left his entrance. Perhaps an hour had passed: the time they had spent at Kelsie’s house. His folks were not there.

“I’ll call them,” he said. “It’s too far to walk.” Kelsie nodded, understanding his meaning if not his words.

He found a phone and called his mother. “Mom, Kelsie and I have something real important we need to talk to you and dad about.”

“Really important,” she said.

“Yes, *really* important.” Then he realized that she had been correcting his word usage. That was one of the annoying little things parents did. “Can you come fetch us at the park?”

“You’re not dating?” she asked, teasingly.

“Mom! Stop that.”

She laughed. “I’ll be there in fifteen minutes. Don’t do anything I wouldn’t approve of.”

“That’s why we’re here,” he said to himself as he hung up. Would they approve?

His mother arrived promptly in fifteen minutes. She was always prompt, as Mark generally was not. If the park had rated him on promptness, it wouldn’t have let him in. She took them home.

Mark presented his case as well as he was able. “So we want your advice and approval,” he concluded. His folks had listened seriously and not given a hint of their reactions. That kept him nervous.

“Kelsie’s parents approve?” his father asked.

“Yes. As long as we don’t leave home. But we have to do it together, as far as we know. Or quit and let two other children into the park.”

“Have you considered that someone or some thing had to have made the park?” his father asked. “Why would anyone make such a park for two children?”

“Yes. That’s part of our mission. We want to find out who is behind it. But we can’t do that unless we take it over. That is, become its caretakers. Then we should have all the time we need to figure it out.”

“Whoever that is, must have dangerous powers. How do you know it’s not some dire plot to take over the world?”

“We don’t,” Mark said uncomfortably. “But we think we ought to find out.”

Both parents nodded. They must have anticipated something like this and discussed it already.

“We agree,” his father said. “Go and fathom Pandora Park, and let us know. We’ll be here for you, whatever you discover.”

“Thanks, dad, mom!” Mark looked at Kelsie and nodded.

“Kelsie is welcome to visit here again at any time,” Mark’s mother said.

“Maybe she will. But remember, when we take over, time will move normally, so we may be gone hours or days at a time. We don’t know what will happen.”

“Then get it done before summer finishes,” his father said. “We don’t want to have to explain your absence from school.”

“We’ll try. We’re just glad you’re okay with it.”

“We’re not easy about it,” his father said. “But you have shown some magical effects, such as time freezing and instant travel around the world. We believe it is safer for us to learn what is going on than to remain ignorant. If this really is some alien project, it is better to be well enough informed so that we can plan a strategy of defense. So we are nervous about your involvement, but trust you more than we would two other children. Certainly we don’t want this in the hands of ignorant politicians. We will help you to the extent we can.”

“Just being here for us to consult helps a lot,” Mark said. “Thanks.”

“Welcome, son.”

Mark’s parents drove them back to the park and watched them enter the path.

“They’re terrified,” Kelsie said when she could talk again. She no longer floated or had super strength; their stay outside the park had stopped that. “I could tell. They’re afraid for you—and me. But they’re doing what they have to do.”

“I guess so. They’re great. I hope it works out okay.”

Wizard and Witch appeared. “So do we. Here’s what we decided: we can’t talk each other’s language outside, or yours. Not until commitment, if we took your lives, and that would be too late. We don’t want you to be stuck in our countries, not able to explain. So we’ll each go alone to our parents, and tell them who we are and what we want, and they’ll either take us back or they won’t. If they take us back, we won’t return here. So if we don’t come back, the park is yours.”

“And we think we won’t,” Witch said. “Your folks’ advice makes sense. You have shown us how to escape, and to resume real lives, in the best possible way. We’re really grateful. I’m going to kiss you, Mark.”

Mark stepped back. “But—”

“Don’t worry. Kisses don’t *have* to make people float. You just have to focus on turning it off.” Actually he knew that; Kelsie had learned how to turn it off. His concern was something else. But before he could try to argue further, she stepped into him and kissed him.

Mark just stood there, stunned. Witch suddenly seemed overwhelmingly pretty and nice, and her touch brought a kind of pleasure he had never before imagined. How was it he hadn’t noticed before?

“But I didn’t turn off the other effect of the kiss,” Witch said, chuckling as she stepped back. “You’ll remember me, and have a crush on me, for a while. But it will fade. Just don’t do it to anyone else unless you have good reason.”

“I—won’t,” he agreed. A love kiss? There was no way to doubt it.

Then both Wizard and Witch vanished. They were going to their separate entrances.

“You look moonstruck,” Kelsie said mischievously.

“I am. She—”

“She showed you another magic trick. We had better not kiss like that.”

“We had better not,” he agreed weakly.

“How long before we know they’re not coming back?”

“I think they’d be back already, if they were going to return. Because of the time freeze.”

“Which no longer applies to us, then.” She fetched her skates. “Now let’s find out what Pandora Park is all about.”

“How do we do that?”

“Oh come on, Mark! You must have some great idea. You figured out how to help me pass three days even after you said you didn’t know how to look.”

Actually he did have an idea. “There are easy paths all over, that just loop around. But there must be some control center or something, and there must be a path to it, but if it doesn’t want to be discovered, that path must be hard to follow.”

“A control center,” she repeated. “A place where the park’s main program is. If we can find it, maybe we can find out who made it, and why.”

“Yes. And—” He broke off, uncertain.

She smiled. “You thought of something. I can tell.”

“It’s just that if only certain children can get into the park, maybe only certain children can even reach that control center. The other children got into the park, but then got carried away by the magic and fun and never went any farther. Until they wore out their childishness, and had to leave. But maybe we’re different. We want to learn the park’s real secret. So maybe this is our challenge. To prove we are the ones who can handle it. *If* we can handle it.”

“I think you’re right. That would explain why Pandora Park has been here for a hundred years or more without changing.

Maybe it's been waiting for us."

"Yes." He was glad she agreed. The idea seemed vain, yet there did have to be a reason they were here.

"How do we proceed?" she asked.

"I'll use my magic to find the wrong path."

She shook her head. "I don't think that will work. If it doesn't want you to find it, it won't let you use its own magic against it."

He realized she was right. The park did have rules, and it enforced them; there was surely a rule against messing with its master program. "So I guess we'll have to do it on our own. Let's see what we can find without magic."

"A difficult path," she agreed. "Or a place without any paths. The control center may need access, but the keeper may simply fly there, leaving no trace of his passage."

"Right," he agreed, surprised. "But we can fly too."

"But first we must prepare." She looked around. "There."

"What?"

"Swimming flippers, hands and feet," she said, holding them up. "I can find things too, and these are what I sought."

Then she was better at it than he was. "Wouldn't wings be better?"

"Not if we don't know how to use them. But if we swim through air, we should get where we are moving."

That did seem to make sense. He found flippers for his hands and feet and fastened them on. The park hadn't stopped this because it didn't know what they had in mind. Maybe it thought they were just going to sport in the air, playing tag or something. "Ready," he said.

She smiled and kissed him on the cheek, then held on to him with her clumsy flippers so he couldn't float away. He kissed her back, and she floated too. But the kisses reminded him of Witch's kiss. He *did* have a crush on her, and if he had had spare time on his hands he knew he would have been thinking about her a lot. So it was magic; the feeling was still real. Even though he was sure she was not the girl Kelsie was.

They swam in air. It wasn't as fast as swimming in water, but they did move. This would get them there. If they got tired, they would give each other strength.

They saw the park forest from above. The paths wound around the edges in a big tangle that seemed designed to confuse those who used them, so they wouldn't realize they were going nowhere. In the center of the park was a thick mass of trees whose foliage completely hid the ground. That should be where it was.

They were slowly losing height as the magic kisses wore off. That was fine. Silently they came down on the center of the park. Mark's foot touched the top of the largest tree, brushing a branch. He swam back upward looking for a better place to go down.

There was a squawk and a huge bird flew up. No, it had the head and wings of a bird, an eagle, but the body of a lion. "A griffin!" Mark exclaimed.

"A guardian," Kelsie said. "It won't let us pass."

Mark removed his hand flippers and drew his sword. "Get away from us, griffin," he warned, as he hovered above the foliage. "We're passing anyway." For this was confirmation that the park was guarding its inner sanctum.

Two things happened. The griffin squawked and flew right at him, its front claws extended. And his sword went dead. He felt the magic leave it, and saw that it had become the pretend sword, the Bokken. That confirmed his earlier suspicion that he could not depend on magic.

He put both hands on it, as he had practiced. He whipped it up as the griffin came in, stabbing at its chest.

And scored. The hard wood jammed into the feathered breast and sank in several inches.

The griffin squawked more in amazement than in pain. But it had been badly injured, and in a moment its wings folded and it dropped back down into the foliage.

Mark hung onto the sword so that he would not lose it, and it drew out of the griffin. There was blood on its tip.

"You slew it!" Kelsie cried. "You're a hero!"

"I caught it by surprise," he said, sickened by the blood. "If

it had known what I was going to do, it would have swept the sword out of my hands and clawed me to death. The magic was gone.”

“But it didn’t know. And you were more of a hero for winning anyway. Now let’s surprise them again.” She swam down into the foliage.

“Be careful!” he cried, following her.

For a moment they were dropping through leaves and branches. Then they dropped beneath the green canopy and came to a level surface below. It looked like the flat roof of a building, with pebbles set in hard tar to make it waterproof. The huge tree grew beside it, leaning over it.

They had just enough weight now to come to rest on its plane. “This must be the place,” Kelsie said.

Then Mark saw the griffin on the other side of the roof. It was lying there, its head on the pebbles.

“It’s hurting,” he said. “I’ve got to help it.”

“But it tried to kill you!”

“It was just doing its job.”

She studied him for a moment. “You’re right. But be careful. Here, let me hug you.” She came and did it, making him strong. Again he was reminded of Witch, wishing that she had been the one there to hug him. Darn that kiss!

Then he went to the fallen creature. “I’m sorry I stabbed you,” he said. “It was in the middle of battle. Now I want to help you, if you’ll let me.” He stopped just out of the creature’s range.

The griffin lifted its head a little and looked at him. Then it sank back down and closed its eyes.

“It didn’t try to attack again,” Kelsie said. “I think that means it understands.”

“I think it’s just a flesh wound,” Mark said, kneeling beside the creature. “Maybe a bandage will stop the bleeding, so you can rest and recover.”

“I found a bandage,” Kelsie said, bringing it.

He didn’t ask whether she had found it or conjured it, maybe learning new magic. He took the bandage and pressed it against the

griffin's breast. It fastened there firmly, magically adhesive, neatly covering the wound. "I'm no medic," Mark said. "I'm hoping the bandage is clean and will prevent infection. I don't know how else to help you. Is there a keeper or someone who will know what to do?"

The griffin just lay there. But it seemed to be breathing more evenly.

"I think the bandage is easing its pain," Kelsie said. "Maybe if we just let it rest, it will recover."

"I hope so." Mark got up.

"This is the place of hope," she said. Then she stood still. "Look!"

Mark looked. There was a raised panel on another part of the roof that they hadn't seen before. It was an opening into the building.

"I think we just passed a test," Mark murmured, awed.

"I think we did," Kelsie agreed. "We showed compassion. Instead of blind hate for a fallen enemy. That must matter to somebody."

"I guess," he agreed. "Unless it's another trap. Do we go in?"

She took his hand. "Yes. We have to know."

Chapter 8: Revelation

Kelsie was far more nervous than she tried to let on, as they descended the stairs from the roof into the building. She always tried to put a positive face on things, but sometimes she didn't succeed. Such as when she had first entered Pandora Park, and gotten hopelessly lost. She still appreciated the way Mark had rescued her. She was a smart girl, but had never been good with directions.

They reached the foot of the stairway and stood in what appeared to be a single small-building-sized chamber. She glanced at Mark. For some reason she had an irrelevant thought: had that kiss by Witch really given him a crush on her? Kelsie didn't think of herself as a jealous girl, and they had agreed to just be friends, and she knew that was best, but somehow she was tempted to kiss him the same way and make him have his crush on her. That would be wrongheaded and foolish, yet there was the thought.

"This looks like nothing," Mark said. "Just an empty room."

Kelsie had a horrible thought. "Maybe it's a decoy. A pretend center."

"A decoy? What for?"

"To lead us wrong so we won't find the real control center and gum up the works."

"Then why guard it with a griffin? It was bad enough hurting that handsome creature, without it being for nothing."

"You're right," she agreed, relieved. "This must be the place. We just have to figure it out."

"Still, let's be careful," he said. "Just in case it's not a decoy,

but a trap.”

That idea gave her a chill. “Maybe we should leave now.”

“Let’s do this: go back on the roof, and if it lets us, we’ll figure it’s not a trap. Then we can explore it with more confidence.”

“And if it *is* a trap?”

“Then we try to fight our way out of it.”

She wasn’t sure of the logic, but it seemed better than nothing. There would not be much point to their effort if they did not remain to discover the real nature of the park.

They mounted the stairs. The panel had not closed, and they stepped out on the roof. The griffin remained there. It raised its head to look at them.

“Are you healing well?” Kelsie asked it, just to say something positive even if it didn’t understand. Now that she had had time to consider it, she was rather proud of Mark for going to the aid of the creature. That was a really nice thing to do.

“Yes, thank you. I appreciate your concern.”

Kelsie and Mark looked at each other, their mouths similarly open. “You talk!” Mark said after a moment.

“Yes. Now I do. I was not permitted, before you qualified.”

“Qualified?” Kelsie asked blankly.

“You showed compassion. That’s important. Not all children do.”

“Well, it’s my fault you’re hurt,” Mark said. “I’m sorry I did it.”

“Exactly.”

Kelsie was impressed. “You mean, if we had not tried to help you, you wouldn’t have let us into the building?”

“No. My part is done. The panel would not have opened, and you would have found no way inside.”

“So this is the control room?” Mark asked.

“It is. But I can’t tell you how it works, because I don’t know. I am merely a guardian robot.”

“A robot!” Mark exclaimed. “But you’re flesh! Otherwise I could not have hurt you.”

The griffin got to its four feet. “I am a machine, made up to

look alive, like other creatures you met. You did not hurt me.”

“But I stabbed you! You were bleeding.”

“A fake wound. It was my job to test your courage, and drive you away if I could. You were no more in danger than you were from the scale hog or the roller coaster. You are not in danger now. But you do have a considerable challenge ahead. I will leave you to that now.” And before they could say any more, the griffin spread its wings and flew into the foliage above.

“Somehow I believe it,” Kelsie said. “And I feel better. Let’s resume the challenge.”

“Yes,” Mark agreed, gazing up where the griffin had gone. “We still don’t know who made the park, or why, or what it wants with us. There must be a good reason, because this is too fancy for a bad reason.”

“Your logic is like your finds,” Kelsie said, smiling. “Not quite right, but close enough.”

“And your comments are like your kisses: they don’t do exactly what you might expect.”

“Oh? Suppose I kiss you as Witch did?”

“Don’t do that!” he said, backing off.

She laughed. “Maybe if we were twice as old as we are, I’d try it.” But she couldn’t resist asking. “Do you really have a crush on Witch?”

“Are you jealous?”

“I think I am.”

“Then here’s the truth: I do like her, but I know it’s because of the magic or whatever and doesn’t make any sense otherwise. I really don’t know her, and I’ll never see her again. I’ll get over it. But I do know you, and respect you, and I think you’re pretty, and if you kissed me like that it would have twice as much effect. So please don’t do it.”

Kelsie felt herself blushing. “I am more than answered. Thank you.” She was immensely reassured, because she did like him despite not wanting to date him. Girls were like that, and she was a girl. It came with the territory.

“Let’s go figure out that control center.”

She was glad to agree.

They went back down the stairs and looked around the empty chamber. What was its secret? It wasn't large, hardly more than a bedroom. If things were stored here, it wouldn't hold much.

Then she saw that there were glassy screens around the edges. In fact the four walls seemed to be made of shiny plastic, that curved around at the corners, floor, and ceiling, so that there were no sharp lines. It was as if they stood in a cubic plastic bubble.

"This is not an ordinary house," she said.

"You bet. It's more like the inside of a water tank."

"I wonder." She faced a wall and peered at her reflection. "Could it be magic, or their super-science?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, maybe there's so little to see because it's not turned on. What we need is to tell it to start." She snapped her fingers. "To flip the switch."

"Hoo!" Mark exclaimed. "What's that?"

For now they stood before a forested scene. In fact they stood *in* the scene. The four walls, the floor, and the ceiling had become like transparent glass in the middle of a glade. They were on a path leading out of the glade, and it looked so real she wanted to walk along it. She took a step, without meaning to.

A twig snapped under her foot, and the soft ground sank slightly. A faint gust of wind tousled her hair.

"Mark! Do you see it too?"

"We're back in the park," he said. "I remember this place. See, there's your taped X mark."

She looked, and there it was. "How can this be? We never left the building."

"I think I know." He snapped his fingers.

The scene faded. They were back in the chamber.

"What is it?" she asked, astonished.

"It's a 3D scene. You know, all the walls are TV screens, and there are sound effects, so we seem to be in it."

"But a twig snapped under my foot. How could that happen?"

He snapped his fingers and looked down as the scene reappeared. “There’s the twig. Pick it up.”

She stooped to do so. Her fingers passed through the twig as if it wasn’t there. “It’s illusion!”

“It’s a holo projection. You see it and hear it, so you think you feel it. But it’s really just the floor. This is really something!”

“It is,” she agreed faintly.

“And it’s real. I mean, not just a recording, because otherwise that tape X wouldn’t show. I think this means that this screen can watch any part of the park, depending on where it’s set.”

“Someone was watching us?” she asked.

“I guess. If someone was in here. But it doesn’t seem that anyone was. There’s no cookie crumbs or cigarette butts or anything.”

She had to smile at his implication about the habits of spies. “The griffin wouldn’t have let anyone in.”

“Maybe,” he agreed. “I wonder if we can set it for other parts of the park.”

“How?”

“I don’t know. The griffin said we had a big challenge coming, but we’re not in danger. So maybe we just have to figure out how to work this thing.”

“So we can spy on an empty park? What’s the point?”

He considered for a moment. “Maybe the point is to figure out how to work it. So then we can use it for whatever it’s supposed to be used for. Does that make sense?”

“A learning program,” she agreed. “Maybe it does.”

“So we know that snapping our fingers turns it on and off. There must be something else to make it change pictures. Maybe stomping our feet.”

He tried a stomp. Nothing happened.

“I wonder whether this is really my X,” Kelsie said. “I’ll go see.”

“You think you’re going to go there? You’ll bang into the wall.”

“I’ll be careful.” But as she oriented on the X, the scene

shifted. That part seemed to expand to fill the view. It was as if she were actually walking along the path. She lifted her feet in turn to walk in place, and the path progressed as though she were really walking forward. Soon she was standing right before the X.

“That’s something,” Mark said. “But I meant jumping to a whole different place in the park.”

“Maybe for that we have to turn it off, and turn it on for the new location.” She snapped her fingers, and the scene faded.

“I’ll try another wall,” he said. He faced away from her and snapped his fingers.

The same scene appeared, but the path was going the opposite direction. Then Kelsie saw something else. “There’s a glimmer near your head.”

“A what?”

“Something like a reflection. Not quite there.”

He looked around, and spied it. “It’s a faint panel. I see it better now that I’m focusing on it. It’s got different little pictures.”

“Poke one,” she suggested. “Maybe it’s a touch screen.”

He tried, but nothing happened. “It’s ignoring me.” He looked at her. “You have one too.”

Kelsie saw it now: a faintly flickering square just to the right of her forward gaze. She focused on it, expecting it to disappear, but instead it intensified. It had nine small pictures of scenes around the park, several of which she recognized: her candy tree, his chocolate ball tree, and the amusement center. “This one,” she said, touching the amusement center. Nothing happened.

“It doesn’t work for you either,” Mark said.

“Oh, pooh!” She poked her finger at his square.

The scene around them changed. Now it was the roller coaster before them.

“You did it!” Mark exclaimed. “What did you do?”

“Yours worked for me. Maybe they’re turned on now.” She touched another picture on her own square. Nothing happened.

“Suddenly I have a wild idea,” Mark said. “Let me try yours.”

“It’s not working.”

He touched a square. The scene shifted. Now they were before a lovely pond where a long-necked creature gazed at them. Then it dropped its head under the water with a splash.

“We have to work each other’s panels,” Mark said. “Just as we have to make each other float, or be strong, or whatever. The way Wizard and Witch had to speak for each other. Except when we find things; I guess we can’t make each other find things.”

“Cooperation,” Kelsie said. “We have to interact.”

“Why does it care?”

She considered. “Maybe if one person could do all the magic, he’d just please himself, and try to make himself king of the world or something. But if he has to work with another person, he has to compromise, and that’s safer.”

“Maybe,” he agreed thoughtfully. “I’ve got the feeling that the park doesn’t much like selfish or thoughtless people. Which is sort of what most children are, really.”

“True,” she agreed. “We’re not like that.”

He smiled. “Well, less like that, anyway. We got tired of candy pretty fast, too. We’re sort of grown-up children. Which is maybe why we didn’t have too many friends.”

“And why we get along well together. We understand each other, even though our cultures are different.”

“The park must want children like us. But why? If it wants maturity, it should have let our parents in.”

She nodded. “It must want sensible children. And we’re more sensible than the others who came here before us, so we were able to find this center.”

“Let’s make sure we have it right,” he suggested. “Let me poke you.”

“If you do, I’ll giggle.” But she knew what he meant, and turned so that her screen angled toward him.

He touched another picture, and the scene changed back to the path they had marked. “I bet if we worked at it, we could figure out how to zero in other sections too,” he said. “These are just samples, to show us how it works.”

“Yes.” But Kelsie had noticed something else. “What’s that

center picture?”

He looked. “A one-eyed snaggle-toothed green ape.”

“I’m glad we didn’t run into that!”

“It does seem sort of out of place. Look—the background isn’t like the park. He’s standing in front of, well, maybe an alien world.”

“If we touch that picture, will we be on that world?” she asked nervously.

“Maybe. But it’s a mock-up, just pictures. So it should be safe. Anyway, we can quick punch another picture if we have to.”

“I wonder. Could it be that the other pictures are to show us how it works, and this is the one that counts?”

“You mean, the one that gives us all the answers?”

“Or at least leads in the direction of answers.”

They pondered. Then, almost together, they both said, “Let’s do it!”

“So do you poke mine, or do I poke yours?” he asked.

“Are you poking fun at me?”

He laughed. “I’ll let you have the first poke.”

She reached up and touched his center picture.

The scene changed completely. They seemed to be in the alien world, which extended outward in every direction. Before them stood the one-eyed green ape.

“Congratulations,” the ape said. “I am Discerno, your guide for this introduction. This is a projection, and I am not as I appear; I merely have assumed a form you will find more compatible. Please make yourselves comfortable. You will find this interesting. You may pause it by tapping your foot, and end it by snapping your digits.”

Kelsie tapped her foot. The ape froze in place. “Do you believe this, Mark?” she asked, uncertain how to react.

“Sure. It’s a recording. To tell us what’s what.”

“Do we really want to know? I thought we were going to discover who made the park, but this is something else.”

“Let’s face it, Kel: no one on Earth could have made Pandora Park. Not a century ago, anyway. So it must have been

aliens. Now at last they're revealing themselves."

"But this isn't a real alien. It's a projection."

"So we won't freak out. He said so. Maybe if we handle this okay, then he'll let us see his real form. I'm curious as anything."

"So am I," she agreed. She tapped her foot again.

"Exactly," Discerno said. "You may also rerun this presentation as many times as you choose. It is important that you understand it well, for there is great power."

"Can we ask questions?" Mark asked.

Kelsie started to laugh, nervously. "How could a recording respond to a question?"

"You may," the ape said. "But it will be better if you play this through once, as your questions may be answered along the way."

"You answered!" Mark exclaimed.

"I am a special guide. You may treat me as if I am alive. There are limits, but this should work at this early stage."

"Okay," Mark said. Kelsie could see he was impressed. So was she.

"You have learned to operate the basic controls," Discerno continued. "This is an excellent start. For further instruction, you have merely to touch the rim of the panel, like this." Now Kelsie saw that the ape also had a panel beside his head.

Discerno touched the edge of his panel. New pictures appeared, each one showing an action and its result. "Or you can simply touch the instruction box," the ape said, touching the one that showed a flat figure becoming rounded.

And then Discerno was standing before them in the flesh, in front of the wall. "This is holographic," he said. "Touch me to verify it."

Hesitantly, Kelsie put forth a finger to touch the green fur. It passed through the fur as if it didn't exist. She moved her hand on through. There was no solid body there.

"As you have verified, this is only an image," Discerno said. "You may revert me to wall-screen status if you prefer. I am unable to harm you, were that my intention." He formed a fist and struck at

Kelsie's arm before she could pull it away. Their arms passed though each other without effect.

"Wow," Mark said.

"There are other effects, but you can study them at your leisure," the ape continued. "You are surely curious about this station, and why it was established here."

"Yes!" Kelsie breathed. "Pandora Park."

"There is a large society of sapient species in the galaxy," Discerno continued. "That is, intelligent creatures on other planets circling other stars. They are separated by many light years, and few have interacted directly with each other. Those that have done so have a bad history. Some have warred with each other, and some have destroyed each other. History has shown that such contact is dangerous, and we discourage it. Nevertheless, there is much to be gained by sharing information between cultures, and this we do encourage. But we place careful limits on such contact."

"Limits?" Mark asked.

"There is no physical travel by these creatures, only holographic images such as I now appear before you. Only special representatives are allowed to participate."

"But if there is no physical travel," Kelsie asked, "who made this park—this station?"

"Robots like me, who have no true will of their own. We follow directions exactly. Those with a will are kept on their own planets, and only selected individuals."

"Children!" Kelsie exclaimed. "You limit it to children!"

"Yes, Kelsie," Discerno agreed. That startled her; she hadn't realized he knew her name. "Can you tell me why?"

"Because—because we're immature," she said, working it out. "Our minds are still open. We're not locked into earning our living, or imposing our will on others, and we have imagination."

"And we can accept other creatures as they are," Mark added. "Without trying to kill them right away."

"This is the nature of children everywhere," Discerno agreed. "They are also able to learn new things faster and better than adult creatures are. So we have formed a society of children of

many species. They come to know each other without hostility or greed, and exchange useful information that benefits their cultures.”

“Information?” Kelsie asked.

“For example, anti-gravity. We can provide you with key instructions to make inexpensive floating platforms that will operate outside the station—what you call the magic park—and will greatly help transportation. You will need to enlist adults of your species who can be trusted not to divulge the source of the information, for if your species leaders discover the true nature of the station, they will attempt to capture it for private benefit. Then we will have to destroy it.”

“But adults know more,” Kelsie said. “They have so much more experience.”

“And their minds are accordingly more set in their ways,” Discerno said. “They are too likely to make war because of religion or greed, and to be deeply suspicious of aliens. We must not risk that. Only very special adults can be allowed to know the nature of this park, and they must never enter it.”

“Our parents,” Mark said. “They know about the magic, but aren’t telling.”

The ape nodded. “This is vital. Only the two of you will be admitted to the park, but the secret must be kept, lest there be disaster. This responsibility is yours. A number of stations have been destroyed because they were discovered, so that their technology could not be misused. Do you believe you can honor this requirement?”

Kelsie exchanged a glance with Mark. Her mouth felt dry. “We’ll try,” she said.

“No promise is in order. You merely need to understand the danger before making your decision.”

“We do,” Mark said, looking extremely nervous.

“Why did you choose us?” Kelsie asked. “And not the children who were here before us?”

“A very special combination of personal qualities is needed. You need to be advanced enough to be able to know and use the technology. You need to be open and caring enough to accept

creatures that may be quite strange to you. You may have noted that you are from opposite sides of your planet; that is not coincidence. You have shown that you can work together despite having different cultures. There are truly different forms and cultures on other worlds. And you need to have the curiosity and drive to find and enter this center. This is where you differ from those before you. You selected yourselves. But I must advise you that this is only the beginning. There will be a period of practice while you meet the children of selected other species, and they will judge whether you belong to their society.”

“Whether we belong?” Kelsie asked.

“You mean we can be kicked out?” Mark asked.

“Yes to both questions. It is my job to introduce you to that society. They will decide whether you are worthy of it. If you are, there will be much for you to do. It is a challenge whose nature you have yet to fully appreciate.” The ape paused a moment. “You may stop at this point, or pause to consider, or continue with the orientation. The decision is yours.”

Kelsie exchanged another glance with Mark. He nodded.

“We want to—to continue,” she said.

The ape shook his head in a human-like gesture, except that his whole head seemed to move from side to side instead of turning. “You must commit for each other, not yourselves. You are a team.”

“But we agreed,” Mark said. Then he shrugged. “However, we can do it your way. Sure, Kelsie: you can go with it. Now do me.”

But the pause made her reconsider. “This is a really big challenge, with scary parts. Still, if we fail, we will be excluding not only ourselves, but our whole world. I don’t know whether I want that much responsibility.”

Mark considered. “We could mess up,” he agreed. “Maybe we should leave it to more qualified children.”

Suddenly she was terrified that he was changing his mind. “No! There have been the wrong children for a century! We’re the first right children to come here. It might be another century before the next right couple comes. To step back now may be to doom our

world anyway.”

“Because meanwhile our ignorant selfish greedy leaders may blow up the planet,” he agreed. “That scares me too.”

“Please, Mark, let’s do it. This is our only real hope. The hope of Pandora’s Box.”

He smiled. “I already told you you could go, and you didn’t even have to kiss me to make me say it.”

Now the decision carried her forward like a tsunami, for good or ill. “You, also, may proceed, Mark,” she said firmly. But her heart was beating madly. What were they getting into?

“I sense high emotion,” Discerno said. “I wish I could share it. But I am only a machine.”

Impulsively, Kelsie went and kissed the ape on the cheek. Her lips touched nothing, but were in the right place. “Maybe we’ll find out how to make you come to life,” she said.

He looked at her as he floated off the floor. “You *are* different. Perhaps you will succeed. I believe I would like that.”

Mark laughed. “You’re dangerous, Kel!”

Kelsie felt much better about their decision.

Author's Note

This is the shortest novel I have written, and interesting in special ways. I had completed a 256,000-word fantasy novel and a 128,000-word fantasy novel in the year 2005, and planned to take the month of November off. I had videos to watch, books to read, games to play, chores to try to catch up on, and so on. But I'm a workaholic, and soon I couldn't help myself: I dived into a children's novel I had been thinking about. That was *Pandora Park*, under 40,000 words, which I completed in that month. So much for relaxing.

As it happened, near the end of *OctOgre* I received an email letter from Kathe Gogolewski: she had written a short children's novel, *Tato*, which she was trying to promote. Did I know a child in the 8-11 year old range who might like to read it? She said that if the child found it anything less than awesome or really good, then I should forget about it. If, however, the child loved the book, perhaps I would consider doing a review. She had been a teacher, and even in retirement was still working with children, so had an excellent notion of their interests.

Why would someone offer to send me a copy free for that? Well, in the book marketing trade authors and publishers seek what are called "blurbs": brief favorable comments by noted figures in the field, such as reviewers or "name" writers. It is one type of promotion, and promotion is vital magic. A good blurb by a well-known figure can lead to added sales, or even help an unknown writer become known and thus successful. I have blurb'd many novels in my day, thus getting my name on the cover of other writer's books, which always struck me as a bit odd. But that's the way of it.

However, there was a problem: my daughters have long since grown up and disappeared into adults; one even has a young child of her own. A practicing writer leads a solitary life; otherwise he doesn't get much writing done. So I have no close contacts with children in that age range. But as it happened, I was making notes for my own children's novel—this one—and was interested in orienting on that market. My novels are generally adult, some definitely not recommended for children. So I wanted to get it right. If she cared to send *Tato*, I would read it, thereby studying an example, and would let her know my opinion. I am new to the children's fiction genre, but am a thoroughly experienced general novelist.

I found *Tato* to be a well-written short fantasy novel that started slow but became compelling as the magic developed. It's about a seven year old boy who tries to make a little brother from a potato and almost succeeds. But he messes up the formula and spills some on a mirror, so not only does he get a talking potato instead of a brother, the mirror starts devouring people, including his parents. Now he has to go into the mirror himself to try to rescue them, and it's harrowing.

Our dialogue continued, and the whole of my novel was written during it. Kathe offered to read it, when it was finished, to a group of her children, and get their reactions to it. She offered helpful advice along the way. When I realized that my female protagonist—lead girl, in regular terms—was to be Chinese, I worried about getting her reactions wrong. Kathe was in touch with a retired history professor and writer of historical fiction, Charles Mossop, who knew about China, and he helped steer me right on Kelsie.

When the novel was complete, I sent it to Kathe, who read it and offered comments. I had many words and concepts that were simply beyond the age level; that's the problem with being an adult genre novelist. I revised accordingly, and she read *Pandora Park* anonymously (that is, the children were not told who wrote it) to her class, one or two chapters a day.

She made quite a report. I had tried to write for the fifth

grade level, but I automatically use the precise word I feel defines the thought, and this makes for a vocabulary well beyond that range. In the third line I had “Her mouth quirked.” Bad word, for this purpose, so I had to eliminate it. In the fifth paragraph I had “...his folk decreed that...” “Decreed” left them blank. And so on, with abashed, analogy, fervently, perspective, implication, hefted, ornate, accelerating, chagrined, formidable, disconcerting, assertive, bemused, labyrinth, selective, emulation and so on. My manuscript was studded with verbal land mines.

Concepts, also, could throw them. I was surprised by the first: the Pandora plaque, summarizing a story I thought everyone knew about the box of evils. I couldn’t remove that, as that’s the rationale (bad word) of the park. So I think my young readers will just have to be confused about that. The time stasis was difficult for them. I can’t blame them there, because it is contrary to science. So I tried to simplify it somewhat, but it remains obscure. There’s a similar time-freeze in C. S. Lewis’ *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*; I wonder whether that also threw his young readers? Toward the end, as Mark and Kelsie explore the visual mechanisms of the park, Kathe had to paraphrase frequently. I tried to clarify it, but again, there was only so much I could do without losing the fundamental mystery of it. So this is not a perfect novel for fifth graders. If they have words and concepts to learn, I may have things to unlearn.

They liked portions very well, however, and half of them rated it at the very top of the five level scale. I added up their ratings, and for about 25 children over the course of five days, it came to 70 A, 35 B, 22 C, 7 D, and 2 F. I’d call that a success. Specifically (bad word) they liked the way Kelsie turned out to be from China, the way Mark battled the tree stump, and laughed when Kelsie slapped the pig-monster and its scales fell off. They loved the way Mark tried to help the wounded griffin, and how that act of compassion opened the way to the secret of the park. There were about as many appreciations throughout the novel as confusions.

There were also some serious problems that I think go beyond what children like or don’t like. This was read at a school,

and schools are extremely sensitive about the potential reactions of conservative parents. Liberal parents are something else. When my daughter's school required children to get parental permission to read *The Catcher in the Rye*, by J. D. Salinger, my daughter raised her hand and announced, "My father *told* me to read it." Many similarly well-known books are banned from young reading lists. So when Kelsie kissed Mark on the cheek, and he floated—that was beyond the pale, for this reading, and instead she pinched his cheek. When she slapped him and his clothes fell off, only his shirt and T-shirt fell off. The scene wherein Mark's mother discovers Kelsie wearing his T-shirt was entirely cut out. The children did not react to any of the original sequence, because it wasn't in the version they heard. And this gives me a problem.

My assumption is that most children see a good deal of television, where violence and sexuality abound, so know the difference between an impulsive kiss on the cheek and forbidden sex. By this age they surely know that babies do not appear magically after a prince kisses a princess. I feel it should be insulting to them to assume that they would misunderstand Kelsie's innocent gesture. So I did not expurgate (really bad word!) it, even though it may make this novel be banned from schools. There have to be some reasonable limits on censorship, which is what this actually is. Yes, children need to be protected from adult passions, which is why movie ratings exist, but let's not throw out the baby (child) with the bath water. In fact, as I see it, this is the very type of restrictive attitude that bans adults, in the novel, from joining the effort to contact alien species. They have been corrupted by social, political, and religious restrictions and are no longer capable of rational thought in this respect. Only children are sufficiently open minded for this project.

But overall, Kathe and the children's comments on the novel were tremendously helpful, providing me a much better notion of this particular market. I expect to write sequels in due course, and will keep the several guidelines in mind. I'm not sure any writer can get a better reader-orientation than this, and I very much appreciate the effort Kathe Gogolewski put into it. Thus the story of this

novel's revision parallels the story of its writing, and the project became a very special adventure.

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