

Sea Dragons

The Mage and the Boffin were taking a break in 'dragon space', as they called it. They had a little shack there, by a lagoon, with a view over a deep green ocean. It was the place that they came to when they felt the need to get away. They called it 'dragon space' because dragons were the dominant life forms, unlike their home space where mammals were dominant.

The larger dragons usually kept to the mountains, and they often saw them flying over, but they were friendly creatures, and a little earlier one had stopped nearby for a bathe.

He flopped into the lagoon, tossing up spray, and rolling over and over in the water. The Boffin swam up to him, and scratched him between the scales and pulled off a few parasites. The dragon, which actually wasn't much bothered by the parasites, still expressed his appreciation by ducking his head, creating a huge fountain of water. After he had finished his bath, he hopped up the beach and spread his magnificent wings to dry. Then he bugled a greeting and flew off.

Now the Boffin was sunbathing, while the Mage was reading a book and occasionally making notes. The Boffin became curious and looked at the spine of the book.

"Why, that's my latest book!" she said, surprised.

"Yes. Do you mind?"

She considered. She was pleased that he was reading it, but she was always a little defensive about her books, with anyone. That was silly, of course. She knew that the Mage's criticisms, if he had any, would be pertinent, accurate, and fair.

"No, of course not. I was just surprised. I know you read my books, but you're not usually interested enough to bring one along when we are relaxing like this."

The Mage shut the book. "Yes, sorry, we are on holiday, aren't we?"

"Oh, that doesn't matter," she said. "I didn't mean for you to stop reading it!"

He explained. "It's just that you talked about it to me, and one bit reminded me of that scroll that I got from down south. So I looked into it, and there is a parallel. An isomorphism. It gave me some ideas on how to extend the spells in that scroll."

"Oh, I see. Maybe I'll take a look at that scroll and see if I can glean anything from it."

The Mage gestured. "There's now a transcript on your desk back home," he said.

"Thank you, my dear." The Mage went back to reading and the Boffin went back to sunning herself. Then she sat up and peered out to sea.

"What's that?" she asked, pointing.

Far out in the distance there was something cutting through the waves towards them. They couldn't see its shape at this distance, but they could see the wake and the white water stirred up by its passage.

"It's like a whale. Does this space have whales, perhaps?" asked the Mage.

“Well, we’ve never stirred far from the shack when we’ve been here, have we? Except when we’ve been dragons, of course.”

They watched it come closer and the silvery shape became clearer.

“Is it a dragon? A sea dragon?” wondered the Boffin.

When it reached the shallows it reared a neck topped by a horse shaped head, and the smaller dragons which corresponded to seagulls and wading birds in this space fled in alarm. The creature had scales, like a land dragon, but its limbs ended in webbed feet, for swimming, with four dragon claws around the edge. Its body was narrow and tall, like a fish. Its extended muscular neck supported its relatively heavy head.

“Oh, look, it’s got gill slits on its neck! It is a water dragon,” said the Mage. “I don’t think any other reptiles have gills do they?”

“Not that I know of, but I can’t be sure. It’s not my field,” answered the Boffin. “Isn’t it beautiful?”

It shimmered with blues, greens, and yellows, striped along its length like a fish.

Suddenly there was a whump as a land dragon bellyflopped into the lagoon. It gripped the sea dragon with its claws, enfolded it in its wings, and the two rolled over and over, stirring up the rainbow sand and throwing water everywhere.

“Are they fighting?” said the Boffin, a little concerned.

“I don’t think so, there’s no biting and no blood in the water. I think that they are just playing!”

The two dragons stopped rolling about in the surf and the land dragon hopped up the beach to the Mage and the Boffin. A land dragon stands on two clawed feet, while its upper limbs are extended so that they can support its huge wings, which it usually wraps around its body when it isn’t flying. Its legs are slightly more bent than human legs and its head extends into a muzzle and when the creature stands normally, its head is a little lower than a human’s head. The Boffin scratched its muzzle, which it opened to show rows of sharp teeth, the dragon equivalent of a grin. They both turned to look at the sea dragon.

He weaved his head from side to side and hooted and the remaining small dragons on the shore took flight. The land dragon trumpeted a higher note in response.

“I wonder what they want?” said the Mage. “The last time that the dragons wanted something there was a human baby involved! But whatever it is, it’s probably under the water. Shall we go?”

The land dragon nudged the Boffin towards the water. “OK, friend,” she said, laughing. “We’ll go along.”

She wondered how much the dragons understood of human speech. They probably picked up the feelings and intents, but there was probably no translation of meaning as such. There was no doubt that she and the Mage were honorary dragons, so far as the dragons were concerned.

She and the Mage walked into the waves and started swimming out through the entrance to the lagoon. The sea dragon followed them out through the gap.

The Mage took water in through his mouth and automatically fed it through his gills. His powerful muscles and webbed feet drove him forward and up, and he broached the surface and flew through the air, plunging back into the water. His wife did likewise. He knew that she loved to fly with the land dragons, and they had once spent some time being horses in a pampas space, so she would be enjoying this. She became the creatures that they occasionally became, almost one hundred per cent. He, on the other hand, while he liked the experiences a great deal, couldn't completely let the human part of himself go.

Their guide sped into the lead and led them off into the wide ocean. The Mage heard deep groans, whistles and clicks, some of which came from their guide. The part of him that was a sea dragon started to understand the messages, and he even responded now and then. Some told of the locations of other dragons, and some pointed them to sources of food, such as shoals of fishes and particularly tasty and nutritious seaweeds.

One message said "Crabs!" and their guide altered course slightly, and they headed down into the depths. Sea dragons loved crabs, but were careful to let them maintain their numbers. The Mage spotted other sea dragons heading in the same direction, so he called out greetings to them, and received replies from them. For some reason he was really pleased.

A reef appeared ahead, coral covered rocks reaching from the depths to the surface. Sea urchins scuttled like animated pincushions from place to place, and gaudy sea slugs oozed from place to place looking for prey. The Mage, in his sea dragon body, ignored them

There was one! He dropped down and seized a crab in his powerful claws. A crunch and a swallow and the crab was no more. He sent out the message "Crabs!", as a sort of all dragons bulletin. He couldn't help but do it. His wife dived into a crack and came up with a crab, but she hadn't captured it completely and it wriggled free. She recaptured it as it fell and it disappeared into her mouth. She, also, sent out the message "Crabs!" to distant dragons.

The sea dragons ate a few crabs and then resumed their journey. Occasionally they were distracted by a fat fish or a large shoal of smaller fish, but they made steady progress. They skirted a small island, and on a reef just off the island, they ripped through a thick jungle of kelp, trailing the luscious seaweed from their mouths. The Mage noticed small sea dragons fleeing from their bigger relatives, but he and the other dragons weren't interested in them.

The sun started to set, and the ocean was suffused by the pink glow from halo of the dragon space sun. Their guide entered a lagoon and swam up to the beach. The Boffin and the Mage changed back to human form and waded to shore. When he saw that they were safely ashore, their guide hooted and then turned tail and disappeared out of the lagoon.

"Well, that was fun," said the Mage. "I guess he'll be back in the morning. We get to camp on this island, I suppose."

The Boffin was shivering a little, since she was still dressed for sunbathing and swimming, so the Mage started a fire. The Boffin pressed a button on her necklace, and she was holding the pocket device that she used for everything. She pressed a few buttons and reached back to the shack and pulled through a few things that they would need, like sleeping bags, a few clothes, and toilet kits. She couldn't stand starting or ending her day without brushing her teeth.

So she did just that, and then she and the Mage sat on the sleeping bags with their arms round each other, wrapped in a blanket, and watched the stars wheel past. Then it got late, so the Mage kissed his wife, and they got into the sleeping bags. The Boffin was dropping off as the Mage kissed her one more time.

“G’night, my love,” she muttered as she drifted off.

“Goodnight,” he replied as he too settled down to sleep.

In the morning she awoke to the delicious smell of frying bacon.

“Mmm, bacon,” she said. “Great! Ooof! I’m a bit stiff.” A brief memory of the crabs from the previous day momentarily overlay the bacon smell. But she was human so the bacon smell won out.

“We must be using different muscles or something. I’m stiff too. I used your device to pull a frying pan and some bacon through from the shack,” said the Mage.

He gave her a plate of bacon and eggs and started into his own plateful.

“No sign of our guide?” she asked.

“Not yet.”

They ate and broke camp, shoving everything back to the shack with the help of the Boffin’s device. It would end up in a big pile, the Boffin knew. Part of her was annoyed that they couldn’t put it back tidily. Of course, they could have stepped through to the shack, but it would have seemed like cheating, somehow.

They splashed and swam in the lagoon in human form until their guide appeared outside it. They swam out to him, taking sea dragon shape as they went. The Mage’s body was a little stiff from the unusual exercise the day before, but his muscles swiftly eased up. He sent a hoot of joy through the depths and heard replies from all directions. Dragons are in general happier creatures than humans, and love expressing it. They followed their guide as he leapt out the water and crashed joyfully back again.

They raced along, propelled by their strong flippers, and the Mage began to feel the rhythms of the sea. The dragons followed a warm current which was flowing in the direction they were going. On either side a cold current flowed in the other direction. He could feel this fifty kilometre wide flow and at first he wondered how. He thought about the sounds he heard from other dragons. Something about the sounds? But then, he lost interest. He could think it out later. He and the Boffin could puzzle it out, if it was important.

The three sea dragons dived. They reached the bottom of the sea, down deep where there was little light, and about as deep as they could go. The Mage scanned the bottom for life, mostly using echo-location, partly using whatever light filtered down or was generated by the life down here. The bottom was mostly a plain, grey to his vision with occasional rocks also covered in grey, as debris rained down from above. He didn’t know what the grey snow was, but recalled the Boffin talking about the phenomenon, so he would ask her later.

A long eel like creature like a piece of grey pipe sped away. The Mage knew it wasn’t good eating. He spotted a large crab which he knew was, and dived on it, catching it directly in his mouth. He

crunched and swallowed. Mmmm! He watched as the other two sea dragons also harvested creatures from the grey plain. Their guide caught a grey slug-like creature that the Mage knew was not the best tasting creature down here, but it would do. The Boffin flipped over a mollusc-like creature and tore the flesh out of the shell. The Mage knew that she'd found the real prize.

They cruised on at this level until they reached a vertical cliff. As they rose up the cliff they came across shoals of small fish that shot up and down the cliff, moving in unison, using all the small caves and folds in the cliff to hide from predators. The fish also darted in and out of the small seaweeds that grew down at this level. Worm like creatures stuck tendrils covered heads out of the smaller holes.

Their guide dragon kept heading on up the cliff. As they got higher the seaweeds became more dense, and the number of types of creatures that they saw grew larger. The sea dragons paused momentarily for a snack whenever they saw a particularly tasty creature. The cliff turned into a steep slope and suddenly, as they got nearer the light at the surface, the rock was covered by corals. All sorts of creatures swam and crawled over the corals, from brilliantly coloured shoals of fish, to brightly coloured sea slugs, cousins of the dull ones down below, and the few spaces between corals were filled by anemones and small multicoloured seaweeds. Various crabs, shrimps, starfish and other small creatures crept and crawled over the corals. It was a wonderland of colour. Stripes, spots, and bands, many of them iridescent, flashed signals across the reef. Molluscs and similar creatures gaped and sieved the waters with waving fans.

The Mage was fascinated. It was so beautiful, that it almost defied description. The three sea dragons swam over the top of the amazing forest of life, continuing in the shallow water on top of the reef, until they came across a large canyon, a layered cleft in the reef. The Mage guessed that it opened out onto the cliffs that they had risen past on their way here. It was full of the same variety of life that covered the rest of the reef.

It was also full of dragons. They crouched in the shallow water at the edge of rift, looking down into the clear waters, and the waters below were full of small dragons. The Mage and the Boffin watched as large dragons shepherded the smaller dragons, keeping the smallest ones at the top and the bigger ones lower down.

The Mage and the Boffin switched to human form. They walked on the air a few feet above the water.

"It's a nursery," said the Boffin. "The smallest up the top where they are safe, the bigger ones allowed to go lower. Eventually they will graduate to the open seas, I guess. Look!"

A sea dragon swam into the rift, holding an egg in her fore flippers. She made her way to the head of the cleft and carefully deposited her egg in a pool, turned and left. The Mage and the Boffin drifted over there on their invisible support and saw that there were a dozen or so eggs there already. A female dragon was carefully helping a baby out of its egg. It gave a wriggle and a squirm and was free of the egg, in a flash of brilliant colour. The "tooth" on its head that it used to break the shell and which it would lose in a day or two was bent at a comical angle. The attendant dragon nudged the baby through a small channel into the main rift, where another dragon, this time a male, took charge of it. Then attendant dragon shaded the rest of the eggs with her wings.

“What attractive little things,” said the Mage. “I wonder why the dragons have brought us here?”

As if in answer their guide bugled and headed off. He waited to be sure that they had dropped back into the water and taken on the form of sea dragons, then he continued in the shallow water over the reef. After a few kilometres they came across another nursery, but this time their guide did not stop. He swam on, and they passed over a couple more nurseries all busy with babies and older sea dragons.

The Mage noticed white patches appearing on the reef. He circled one and the other two copied him. The coral was bare of life, dead. He swam in the direction that they had been heading, and the guide sped ahead.

Suddenly they came across another rift. Fully half the coral was white and dead, and the Mage was appalled. The baby dragons seemed listless, slow moving, tired. As they watched a nurse dragon picked up a baby and swam down the rift towards the open sea. The Mage hoped that he was just moving it to another rift.

The Boffin and the Mage stood over the dying rift on their invisible platform.

“It’s awful, isn’t it?” said the Mage. He was almost in tears.

The Boffin was also affected by the sight. “We must do something. Such magnificent creatures. Such sweet babies.”

“I don’t feel any malign influences. Whatever it is, it seems ‘natural’, if such a disaster can be called natural.”

The Boffin touched her necklace pendant and it turned into her favourite pocket device. “Can you provide a screen, please, my love?”

“Sure,” said the Mage. He gestured and a white screen appeared and the Boffin used her device to throw up some numbers on the screen. It was all green.

“Not a trace of yellow or red. In both the Science and the Magic areas.” The Boffin sounded depressed.

“We need an expert. An expert on coral reefs. George?”

“Yes, George! We’ll have to let him into our secrets, though.”

She meant, of course, their roles as Mage and Boffin, and their ability to step between spaces or worlds.

The Mage considered. “He’ll be OK. His wife, Linda, is definitely in my camp, but she’s sensible too. Not a moon child or a crystal believer, though those beliefs have their place, of course. They’re open-minded, and won’t gossip. It will still be a shock to them.”

“How do we tell the dragons that we are working on it? Never mind, leave it to me.”

She grabbed the Mage’s hand, and they plunged back into the water. She hooted and squealed at their guide, and looped around him. The Mage caught some of their conversation, but the Boffin always submerged herself more into being the creatures that they became than he did. He wryly and affectionately reflected that it should have been more of a trait that he would be expected to possess,

but the glorious thing about their relationship was that they didn't stick rigidly to their traditional Mage and Boffin roles.

She hooted at him, and they resumed human form, above the reef.

"He's nice that dragon. Reminds me of Will."

Will was one of their grandsons. The Mage sensibly acknowledged his wife's judgement, and they stepped back to their shack, and then back to their cottage in their home space.

"OK, let's go see George!" said the Boffin.

But first they called him at home. Yes, he'd love to see them.

The Boffin rang his doorbell, and Linda greeted them. The Boffin loved Linda, possibly because she was so like a female version of the Mage. They chatted for a while, then George remarked that, while it was nice to catch up, they obviously wanted something. The Boffin gave George a hug and admitted it.

"George, we need your expertise. We have a dying coral reef, and we need to save it."

George was perplexed. He was, after all, an expert on coral reefs. "What reef is that, Professor? I don't know of an endangered reef. All the reefs are under protection and safe, so far as I know."

"Can you trust us, George? We will show you things that you will not be allowed to mention. I'm serious about this. Of course, we trust you, otherwise I wouldn't even have asked you."

"That's intriguing. What do you think, Linda?"

"Yes, we can trust them, I'm sure," smiled Linda.

"OK, we trust you. Now, where is this reef, Professor?"

"It's not here, George. The best way is to show you. Can we please hold hands?"

George and Linda were perplexed, but held hands with the Mage and the Boffin, and then the Boffin stepped. Linda gasped. She spun around on the beach and took in the multicoloured sand, the little shack at the jungle's edge and the mountains, blue with distance.

"Oh this is so beautiful. Where is it? How did you do that?" She looked exhilarated.

George bent down and filtered the rainbow sand through his fingers.

"Where are we, Professor? This isn't ... Terra? I know my beaches. How do you do that? Oh, the sun has a halo! I feel lighter. Is the pull of gravity slightly less?" He looked a little shocked.

"Yes," said the Boffin. "You are right. We're not on Terra. We're in a different place. My husband and I call them 'spaces' and they are all around us. You've heard about alternative Universes, George? This is very much like one of those. I'll explain in detail later, if you want. But first we want you to look at this reef. Please hold hands again."

They stepped in the same space to the ailing reef. George and Linda looked at the sick coral and the even sicker baby dragons with horror.

“What are they? Lizards? No, they’re dragons! Can we help them? George? What do you think, dear?” said Linda.

“We’ll have to try. Have we got any analyses of the water, and the coral, Professor?” he asked the Boffin. Their conversation quickly turned technical and scientific.

The Mage grasped Linda’s hand and said “Let’s let them get on with their work.”

He stepped back to the shack with her.

“This is so amazing! How did you do that, Magus?”

“Well, it’s an ability that all people have, but don’t know it. If you think about how I did it, you’ll see.”

Linda disappeared for a second or two, then reappeared.

“Oh, yes! I see.”

“Wow, that was quick!” said the Mage. “Most people take a while to manage the trick.”

As evening fell the Mage called his wife in. She and George appeared, still arguing. The Mage sighed. Scientists always argued, even when they agreed with each other. Linda appeared on the deck in front of the shack and called them to eat. She’d created a seafood chowder, using ingredients harvested by the Mage, and they all loved it. The Boffin cracked a bottle of wine as they sat and ate and watched the pink sunset.

The Mage had caused a second shack to appear for George and Linda to use. Later, when everyone was feeling tired, George and Linda bade them a good night and strolled off towards it. The Mage and the Boffin watched them go. George was holding hands with Linda, and was gesturing at the long multicoloured beach and the unfamiliar sky.

“She’s one of yours, you said.” stated the Boffin.

“Definitely. It’s amazing how quickly they’ve accepted this, isn’t it? She’s very fast. Very, very fast. Any luck with the coral? Let’s get Linda’s intuitive view tomorrow. She impresses me a lot. Oh, and George is definitely one of yours. Give him a scientific question and you could transport him to anywhere, and he’d probably not notice.”

“We don’t think it’s a virus or bacterial disease. Or a predator. We’re wondering if it could be a nutrient. Something has changed, but we don’t know what yet. You’re right about George.”

The Boffin was quiet for a while. He kissed her head.

“Penny for them?”

“Only the usual. At some time we will retire and someone else will be Mage and Boffin.”

“These two?”

She thought a bit. “No, but they can be a big help. Maybe we can enlist them. They are so quick to accept everything, and they split the roles so nicely. But my Mage traits say that they are not the ones. My feelings.”

“Do you want to retire?”

She turned to him and stroked his face. "Not yet. I enjoy my life. I don't get bored. I love my kids. And most of all, I love you."

He stroked her cheek. "And I love you, my dear."

He looked out at the unfamiliar stars, so different from home.

"You know we go by 'Adam' and 'Eve' among people who don't know we are Mage and Boffin? Remember our predecessors said their names were 'Adam' and 'Eve' too?" he said.

"Yes."

"Well, I wonder if they really were the first? Maybe 'Adam' and 'Eve' are labels, like 'Mage' and 'Boffin'."

"Maybe." She yawned. "Why do you ask?"

"Well, George calls you 'Professor' and Linda called me 'Magus'. Maybe we are gaining some new labels!"

"Maybe. But I'm not going to lose sleep over it. This problem with the sea dragons, though... I hope that I can sleep. George and I want samples from other rifts distant from the ones where the coral is dying, by the way."

"OK, we can do that," he said, and they went to bed. He knew that in spite of her worries about the dragons that she'd be asleep in minutes.

In the morning they all stepped out to the dying coral rift. The Boffin and George had set up a shed on one of the dying patches, and had some aquarium tanks bubbling away. Each had some specimens of coral and each had a clipboard attached. The Boffin had acquired a microscope from somewhere, probably home, which projected an image of some cells onto a white board. Photos of various corals and seaweeds were pinned to the walls.

"This is impressive," said the Mage. "Do you have any clues yet?"

"Not from the corals, yet, but the big kelp from the edges shows a definite change about six months ago," said George. He showed them where the growing tips of the kelp were frayed and a slightly different colour. "We need some samples from the untouched rifts for comparison. Can you guys do that, please?"

"Sure. Do you want to try being a sea dragon, Linda?" said the Mage.

"Oh, can I? George said that the Professor changed into a dragon to get their samples. I'd love to try it."

"It may feel a bit strange at first," warned the Mage. He needn't have bothered, as Linda was a natural. She got into the water and the Mage helped her change, and she shot off, out of the dying rift into the open sea as if she had been born a dragon. He joined her, and they swam along the cliff, broaching side by side until they found another rift. This one seemed healthy, and they found a juicy kelp grove. They hooted at the nurse dragons in the rift in greeting, and they hooted back. The Mage chewed off a large branch and so did Linda, and they quickly returned to the dying rift with the sample branches.

“That was amazing!” said Linda. “I like being a sea dragon. Though it was all I could do to not eat the kelp branch!”

Linda and the Mage returned to the water and headed along the reef edge in the opposite direction, and the sight sobered them. Much of the reef in this direction was dead and some of it was crumbling as waves crashed on it. Eventually they passed the edge of the dead area and found a healthy rift and were able to get samples for the Boffin and George.

They reported their findings and the Boffin and George set about analysing the kelp. Linda and the Mage sat on the edge of the reef and dangled their feet in the water.

“What do you think about this, Linda?” asked the Mage.

“About the coral, Magus? Hmm.” She thought a bit. “Are there any volcanoes nearby?”

“You think that they might have been poisoned by an eruption? There’s no sign of one.”

“No, I read somewhere that some volcanoes send out lava that flows over long distances, even down to the sea. Where it meets the sea there’re explosions and steam and trace elements can leach into the water. That sort of volcano can erupt for a long time. Then ocean currents take the trace elements to other places.”

“That’s a good idea. We’ll feed our pet scientists, because they will never think to eat, and then go and have a look. Why did you call me ‘Magus’, Linda?”

“Oh, sorry. Did I do wrong? That’s the magic equivalent of ‘Professor’, isn’t it?” She was embarrassed.

“It’s OK. I quite like it, though it’s not quite the equivalent of ‘Professor’.”

So they made some sandwiches, which the Boffin and George ate without stopping work and without really noticing, then they slipped into the water and headed for the sea cliff. The Mage didn’t have to help Linda become a sea dragon this time.

They cruised the cliff at the edge of the reef for a while, and then the Mage had an idea. He dived to the base of the cliff and sure enough there was a strong warm current coming from more or less directly off shore. He trumpeted and Linda followed him as he headed out against the current. They passed over a sandy plain, with the rainbow sand swept into swirls and lines beneath them. Small flat fish flapped away as they passed, but they weren’t hungry, and besides they were more bone than flesh. They pressed on when the bottom dropped away, following the rocky bottom with its ledges and steep cliffs. Each small patch of sea bottom that wasn’t vertical had its own group of animals and plants.

Finally, at quite a depth, the bottom, which by this time was mostly rock, levelled off and started to climb. Eventually it turned to solidified lava, and if the Mage had possessed thumbs at the time he would have given Linda a thumbs up. It looked promising. Eventually they reached a rocky coast where cold and solidified lava met the sea. They climbed up onto the rock and resumed human shape.

They discovered that they were on a small island, where an undersea volcano had reached the surface. A line of volcanoes disappearing into the distance, a couple of them producing plumes of smoke.

“It looks like this island is the newest in the chain, but it seems to have stopped erupting. I wonder if that’s the issue?”

Linda was trying to break off a bit of the lava.

“Let’s take them back a sample,” she said.

“Here, let me,” said the Mage and knocked a small chunk of the rock from the rest with a ball of fire.

“Oh, of course,” said Linda. She tried but only produced a small spark. They laughed.

“Concentrate it, Linda, and aim it.”

This time she created a huge bang and split off a rock the size of her head.

“I think that you need to control it a bit,” said the Mage wryly. “Anyway, we’d better get back. By the way, not everyone can do that, so it appears that you have some powers. That means that it is most likely that George has powers too, but they will be in my wife’s domain. I’d already wondered about that.”

“But how do we carry the sample?”

“We’ve done this sort of thing before. The easiest way is for me to swallow it and vomit it up when we get back.”

“Gross,” laughed Linda.

So the Mage waved a hand over the piece of rock and it became a small pearl. He swallowed the pearl, and they sped back to the reef. They were able to stay on the surface, now they knew the way, so they could show their joy at being sea dragons by leaping out the sea as they sped along.

They arrived back to find George sitting the edge of the reef with his feet in the water. Linda climbed out of the water and hugged him.

“You should try being a sea dragon, dear. It’s amazing!”

“I will,” he laughed, “As soon as we manage to solve this puzzle.”

The Mage vomited his pearl onto the reef, waved his hand over it and it reverted to being the small rock.

“Maybe this is a piece of the puzzle. We followed an underwater current out to some volcanic islands. If you look over there you can just see them. It looks like they recently stopped erupting and the lava stopped going into the water.”

“Excellent!” said the Boffin. She scanned the small rock with her pocket device. “Hmm, selenium is high in this sample. And iron. Silicates. Other stuff typical of lava. Selenium? Let me look. Ah, yes, selenium is quite low in the water round here.”

She split the rock with small burst of fire and reduce one half to powder.

“What do think George? Shall add some powdered rock to one of the tanks? It might give us a rough indication.”

“Can you throw the analysis onto the wall, Professor? Thanks. There doesn’t seem to be anything there that will harm the samples. Nothing toxic. Let’s do it.”

So they put some powdered rock into one of the aquarium tanks, and they all returned to the shacks for the evening.

“Well, we’ve done as many tests as we can. We’re just waiting for them to finish,” said the Boffin after they’d eaten. She sipped on her wine. “Now we need to think it all through. As a working hypothesis, thanks to you guys, the volcanoes stopped erupting and therefore loading something, selenium most likely, into the current. I think we all agree that that is the most likely cause of the problem. If it is, we can dress the areas where the coral is dying with selenium. We can also think about restarting the eruptions, if possible. I don’t like fooling with volcanoes, though. We’d have to look at that.”

Since there was not much they could do except wait to see if the coral was helped by the powdered rock, and for the Boffin’s machines to analyse the samples, including the seaweed ones that the Mage and Linda had brought back, they decide to explore a little. So the next morning they all slipped into the sea and became sea dragons. Hooting to each other they headed out for the volcanic chain of islands. They exchanged greetings with other dragons far and wide and some even joined them for a while. They were shown a patch of sea where spider crabs lived, and they filled their stomachs with the succulent meat, thanking the other dragons for the tip.

The four sea dragons swam up one side of the small group of islands, and passed through a gap when they decided to return. They stopped off and resumed human form now and then to watch red-hot lava ooze down towards the sea. Water battled lava and waves turned to steam on the red-hot rocks, but unfortunately the current in the area went in the wrong direction, so anything which was leached from the lava here couldn’t help the corals and the dragons. On the way back, though, they passed a beach where some lava had been ground into pebbles by the waves. The Mage turned into the little bay and called the others in too.

They stood on the lava beach.

“Has this got selenium in it, my dear?” said the Mage. “If so, we should gather a cropful each and take it back to the rift that is dying, just in case.”

The Boffin checked. “Yes, this stuff will do. It shouldn’t need much.”

So the Mage waved his hands over handfuls of the lava pebbles, and they all swallowed the pearls and headed back. When they arrived they vomited their loads onto the dead coral next to the hut and changed back to human form.

“Well, that was interesting! Let’s check on our tanks, Professor,” said George.

The tank which they had seeded with the gravel from the rock that the Mage and Linda had brought back looked a lot healthier. The coral animals already looked better. They were waving tentacles in the water to catch floating food, and there was even a very small seaweed growing on the coral.

“That was quick!” said the Boffin. “I’d expected it to take a couple of days. A week maybe. It’s not proof, but we can start seeding the rift, I think.”

In contrast, the other tank still looked sad. The coral animals were only listlessly waving their tentacles. Linda plopped a lava pebble into the tank, and they all looked at her.

“Well, I felt sorry for it! Them.” she said.

It was a much more cheerful meal that evening. The Mage had caught and baked a fish large enough for the four of them. George and the Boffin felt that they still had to prove that it was a selenium deficiency, and argued endlessly about it, but the Mage and Linda just ignored them. They didn’t really care, because they knew that they had a solution. But they all discussed how they would go about seeding the lava gravel around the affected areas.

Then the Boffin said “We have to have a serious talk, you two. You now know about other spaces, you know how to step, and you know how to be other creatures. You’ve coped with that knowledge really well. Outstandingly. You know some of the abilities that we have kept hidden, and you know that you have some abilities too! We weren’t expecting that, to be honest. We trust you, otherwise we would not have involved you in this, but we would like to know what you are going to do. We could, if you wish, wipe out your memories of this space and the dragons. But only if you ask us to.”

George and Linda looked each other.

“Linda?” said George.

Linda looked at the Boffin and the Mage. “We can’t go back and say anything, because people would not believe us. We can’t show people how to step, because that would cause chaos with people stepping everywhere. It’s been so much fun, being dragons, and we are so pleased that we have found a solution for the coral problem too! We’d love to see more spaces, but I’m guessing that not all spaces are as nice as this.”

“That’s true,” said the Mage. “Some of them are pretty horrible.”

George said “Well, Professor, we have talked about this. We even considered forgetting as an option, but neither of us want to do that. It’s been glorious being sea dragons for a while. We want to learn more, and visit other spaces, so we were thinking, could you use a couple of apprentices?”

The Boffin laughed and hugged them. “When we were thinking of asking you to help us with the problem here, we knew you could be trusted, but when we saw how quickly you accepted that you were in a different space and that you have no problems with stepping and being other species, we wondered. Yes, my dears, of course you can be our apprentices. Our very first apprentices!”

Later the Boffin and the Mage were laying in bed in their shack. The Boffin was snuggled up against the Mage, and he had his arm around her. This was their preferred position just before they went to sleep, the time when they discussed important things, like how to help out in this space or that space, or whether they needed to buy more eggs the next day.

“It will be interesting having apprentices, won’t it?” said the Boffin.

“Yes, and I feel we need to plan ahead a little. We’ll probably get more of them, as time goes on. George and Linda will be special, as the first, but as we get more, it will become crowded here, if we let it. I suggest that we create a new space, much like this one, which we will give over to the apprentices. Oh, George and Linda can keep their shack here if they want, because they are the first, but I don’t want any more here, do you?”

“No, of course not. But I want George to install sensors in the reef. No more shocks like that one, please! I want George and Linda to do a complete survey of dragon space. Well of this dragon space Terra, I mean. Remember we didn’t know about sea dragons a week ago? And we know nothing about the herd beasts, except how tasty they are when we are dragons. Who knows what else is out there?”

He kissed her head and smiled. “Always the scientist. But I agree.”

She yawned. “Anyway, it will be nice to have a baby around.”

“What! Is she...”

“Not yet, I think. But soon, she told me. She and George have discussed it, and it’s time. But it’s a secret. G’night!”

She kissed him and snuggled down. Shortly she started snoring lightly. As he had done almost every night since they had been married, he leant over and kissed the top of her head.

“Good night, my love.”

Then he switched off the light and settled down to sleep himself.