

## The World Within

Fi paused at the bottom of the steps. She consulted the paper map of the campus for the hundredth time, out of sheer nervousness, and made her way up the steps. There was a large area of concrete slabs just outside the main doors of the building, with scattered planters and fixed seats everywhere.

The map called it “The Patio”. There was an artist’s impression in a bubble to the side of the map, showing students seated on the hard seats, with standing students talking to them, and other students walking about. Large exotic plants filled the planters. A coffee cart was doing brisk business.

The reality was somewhat different. No one was sitting on the seats and only a few people hurried across The Patio into and out of the building. The shrubs in the planters were small and sparse, and stiff gusts of wind shifted leaves and litter around the area. There was no coffee cart.

Fi sighed. She had seen The Patio when she had come up for her interview, but it all seemed a bit depressing this time. She decided that it was nerves, and passed into the building under the huge steel band that ran all the way across the front. Over the doors, the band bore the words, in copper coloured letters, “Scott Memorial Science Building”.

Student society stalls were crammed into the atrium. People were milling around, signing up for various societies and clubs, and chatting with the people sitting behind the stalls. Suddenly she saw a stall that had a banner that read “Free Coffee”. She didn’t usually drink coffee, but she decided she needed something.

“What can I get you?” said the barista.

“Coffee?” she tried.

The barista waved at a long list of coffees on the board.

“She’ll have a flat white,” said a voice. “Sugar?”

“Ah, no, thanks.”

“Name?” said the barista.

“Er, Fi. F. I.” Her name was pronounced “Fie”.

“I’ll have a double mochaccino, no sugar, please,” said Fi’s helper.

“Name?”

“Jess.”

Jess and Fi stepped out of line to wait.

“Thanks, Jess,” said Fi.

“So, you’re not a coffee drinker, Fi?”

“No, but I needed something. What’s a ‘flat white’?”

“Coffee, about as simple as you can get out of a barista.”

“I usually just take half a spoon of coffee, hot water and milk.”

“You should have asked for that. I would’ve loved to have seen the barista go white.”

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They took their coffees past the stands to a seating area at the back. Fi’s cup had “Fifi” written on it.

“First year?” asked Jess.

Jess was a red-headed, freckled-skinned girl, slightly taller than Fi. She was wearing tight blue denim jeans, a white and blue t shirt with a denim jacket over the top. She wore slip-on shoes with a hint of a heel, and she wore her red hair long and loose, down to her shoulders.

Fi’s skin was darker. She had the look of the Eastern Provinces, She was wearing beige slacks with a crisp white blouse and a beige jacket. Her shoes were also beige. She wore her hair long, but hers was dark, and pulled back in a businesslike ponytail.

“Yes, is it obvious?”

“Yeah, a bit. You’re a bit dressed up. I’m a first year myself, but a former boyfriend is a student here, so I’ve been around the campus a bit. What subjects?”

“Maths. The three compulsory papers and another 100-level, this semester. I’ve not decided on my courses for the next semester yet.”

“Wow, me too. Well, the compulsory papers, anyway. I’m doing Maths too. You’re here for the induction, then?”

“Yeah. Room ... 113?”

“That’s a big old lecture theatre on the first floor. Shall we go up?”

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There were already a couple of dozen people in the lecture theatre, scattered around, talking to one another, making new friends.

“Oh, hi, Felix,” Jess said to a boy who was sitting alone. “I was looking for you.”

She gave him a hug.

“Felix, meet my new friend, Fi. Fi, Felix and I grew up together, but his family moved away, what, five years ago?”

“Yeah, about that. Hullo Fi.” He shook hands with her.

Felix was a pale skinned boy with blond, almost white hair. He was wearing denim jeans, a t shirt with a logo on the front, and sneakers.

“Fi?” questioned Felix. “Spelled ‘F. I. E? Is that short for something?”

“No, spelled ‘F. I.’ That’s my whole name. People always ask that,” she said.

“The barista put ‘Fifi’ on her cup,” said Jess.

“Barista joke,” said Felix. “It helps them remember who ordered what. I usually get ‘Flicks’ or something like that. Or something cat related.”

They chatted as the room filled up. Finally, Dean of Students appeared and told the new students what they needed to know for their first few weeks of the semester, and where they could get further information. He listed the tutorial groups and the professors and graduate students who would lead them. He mentioned the support groups that could provide help if they needed it. Of course it was already in the material that they had received as new entrants, but there were a few changes. Still, Fi had opened her laptop, and was taking notes, and so was Felix. Jess was listening intently, but taking no notes.

“Are you not taking notes, Jess?”

“Trick memory,” she said.

She then repeated what the Dean had said word for word.

“I’ll have to write it down, later, as it doesn’t last,” she explained.

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Later, they were sitting in the cafeteria, drinking coffee.

“Oh, there’s Mark,” said Jess, all of a sudden. “I must see how he’s doing. Back in a minute.”

She shot off, and Fi felt a little abandoned.

“Mark is her so-called ‘ex’,” Felix said, noticing her expression.

“‘So-called’?”

“They’re always checking up on each other, and neither is dating anyone else!”

“Oh,” laughed Fi. “I see!”

“Are you in the Halls, Fi? Jess and I are.”

The Halls accommodated first year students who weren’t living at home or in digs. Not everyone got in, but most did.

“Yes, I went and got my key earlier.”

She showed him. 721.

“Mm, seventh floor. Jess is one down from you. I’m way down on level three.”

He looked so sad that she laughed.

“I know Jess well,” he explained. “We grew up together, so we get along well. She’s fun to be around.”

“The life and soul of all the parties?” suggested Fi.

Felix thought deeply. “No, not really. She likes parties, and so do I, but not what you meant.”

Fi wondered if Felix would like to be dating Jess, but just then Jess came back.

“Fi is in the Halls, on the seventh floor, and you’re on six,” said Felix.

“Oh good! Shall we go and settle in?”

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Fi was lying on her bed, missing home, which was silly, all things considered. Her phone rang.

"Fi, are you settled in? Come on down! 614!"

"OK! I'll be there in a minute."

She shut her door and made her way through the commons to the stairs and descended to the next lower level. She walked through their commons and looked for 614. The door was open and a girl was leaning on the door frame talking to someone inside.

"Come on in, Fi. Catch you later, Jean," said Jess.

Jean nodded and moved away. Jess shut her door.

"Jean's OK. But a bit of an organizer. Student Floor Rep, that sort of thing. She's nice, but I don't want to be organized right now. How are you settling in?"

"Good!"

"Nah, you're missing home aren't you?"

"What about you?"

"Well, I've been around the University for much of last year with Mark. Been at school in the city. So I'm used to being away from the folks, but yeah, I didn't think that I'd miss them, but I do."

"I was at school in the city too, but it doesn't seem to make any difference, does it? So, how do we cheer ourselves up?"

"A burger and the student bar?"

"The student bar?"

"Oh, you've never been in a bar? Don't worry. It's not as bad as all that!"

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Fi considered. It wasn't as bad as all that. True, a sports team had taken over a side room, and were singing songs, the lyrics of which she tried not to hear. But mostly it was people, probably students, relaxing and chatting to other people.

The first year group was mostly centred round Fi, Jess, Felix and a half dozen others, but other people joined and left over the course of the evening. Mark joined for a while, and Fi chatted to him, but he kept looking at Jess. Eventually Jess chatted to him, and gave him a brief kiss on the cheek before he moved away.

Fi had only had one drink. Her family were not drinkers, though her mother, Fee, occasionally had a glass of wine. She noticed that Jess had only had one glass too. Felix wasn't drinking much either, and looking around, Fi saw that except for the roisterers in the side bar, no one seemed to be drinking heavily.

"You look relieved," laughed Jess. "It can get crazy sometimes, but it's usually much like this. Let's 'mingle'."

"Mark's nice," said Fi.

Jess was quiet for a moment. "Yeah. I thought at one time... You should go out with him, Fi. Even if you don't click, he is a nice boy. He'll look after you."

"Me? Why me?"

"Because you're a nice girl," Jess said, not answering her question. "Come on, let's talk to people."

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Fi gave Jess' suggestion some thought. She hadn't intended, still didn't intend, to find a boyfriend here at Uni, but she had suddenly realized that it could happen. But why did Jess suggest her so-called ex-boyfriend as a possibility?

So, Fi went out for a meal with Mark when he asked her, and they took in a movie, but at the end of the 'date', when Mark tried to give her a kiss, she pushed him away.

"You don't really want to do that, do you?" she asked.

Mark put his hands in his pockets.

"No, not really. I'm sorry, Fi. I only went out with you because Jess suggested it."

Fi laughed. "Jess did? Oh, that's so unflattering, Mark! Thanks a lot, I don't think! Why would she do that? What is it between you two, anyway?"

“Oh, I don’t know! We went out for most of my first year. She was at school not far from here, and I met her when she and some of her friends came to watch the annual university athletics games.”

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Mark noticed the red-headed girl right away. She and her friends were leaning on the barrier between the field and the stands. Some of her friends were egging each other on and raucously calling to the boys on the field. Jess was laughing along with the rest, but not joining in with the yelling and waving.

“Your friends are noisy,” he said to her.

“Yeah, aren’t they? They’re mostly harmless, though.”

She sat down on the first row bench, so he climbed over the barrier and sat down beside her.

“What’s your name? Are you a runner? You have that look,” she said.

“Mark. What’s yours?”

“Jess.”

“Yeah I’m a runner, Jess. My race is on in about twenty minutes according to the timetable.”

“Are you any good? Sorry, what a silly question!”

“I should make the final, but there’s some top runners here today.”

“Good luck, then!”

They chatted for a bit, then Mark left for his race. He took Jess’ phone number with him. Jess reflected that she shouldn’t have done that, but he probably wouldn’t call.

He did call. He invited her to a movie, and she accepted. It probably wouldn’t matter, she thought. They went out for a meal. Then suddenly, it seemed, her friends no longer referred to “Jess” but to “Jess and Mark”. She spent a lot of time with Mark up at the university, going to student shows, watching the struggling bands who toured the university and college circuit, or just hanging out with Mark and his friends in the student bar. She was going up to university next year, she rationalized to herself, so it was a good idea to become familiar with the place, wasn’t it?

Mark kissed her. That was OK, wasn’t it? It was OK to enjoy the feeling when he held her, wasn’t it? It was OK to feel as if something was missing when he wasn’t by her side. Wasn’t it? Then everything changed.

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“What happened, Mark? Why did you break up?”

“You tell me, Fi. I’ve no idea. I’m not even sure we’ve ‘broken up’,” said Mark, with bitterness in his voice.

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One day Jess and Mark were walking through the campus, hand in hand. They had just been to a political meeting held by one of the student political clubs. A group of protesters had tried to disrupt the meeting, and there had been a bit of pushing and shoving but no actual violence, fortunately, and eventually the protestors were persuaded to picket outside. The actual meeting was an anticlimax after that.

“Jess, we’ve known each other for more than six months now.”

“Yeah, more like seven. I’ve enjoyed it so much! You’re a lovely person.”

“I want you to meet my parents, Jess. Would you come down with me next weekend? Please?”

Jess stopped dead.

“Oh no! I’ve been so stupid.”

She burst into tears.

“Oh Mark, I’m so sorry. I can’t meet your parents. I can’t see you any more. I’m sorry!”

She ran away from him, stopped, looked back at him. She stretched out her arm as if she was reaching for him, then sobbed.

“I’m sorry!” she said again, and ran off.

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“Wow! I wonder what it is about meeting your parents that caused that?”

"I don't think it's that, Fi. I think the invitation was a trigger. It made her realize something. Maybe, hopefully, she realized that I loved her. And she, I guess, I hope, I think, realized that she loved me. But I don't understand her reaction. I've been thinking about it ever since."

"So, let's assume that it wasn't actually meeting your parents that scared her. Wait a minute, she wasn't scared, was she?"

"No, I didn't get that impression. She was shocked, but not scared."

"So... her meeting your parents means that you would then presumably meet her parents. Something about her parents, maybe?"

"Noooo," he said, considering. "When she has talked about them, she talked about them as any other girl would about her parents. There were no hints of anything odd about them."

"Religious beliefs? Social pressures?"

"No, she didn't mention anything like that. I got the impression that they are pretty liberal, in fact."

"Marriage? Because that's what can follow on from meeting the parents."

Mark thought again. "Well, I can't deny that it was at the back of my mind. A possible future thing, if all went OK. But I don't think it was that."

"But you didn't split up completely. Anyone can see that!"

"No," agreed Mark. "We still go out together sometimes. But she won't let me kiss her, though her body language says that she wants me to. She keeps encouraging me to go out with other people, but I've never done so before."

He paused. "Don't get me wrong, Fi. You're a lovely person, but maybe I only went out with you so that we could have this chat. Maybe you could help me. Us. Sorry."

Fi laughed. "I think that I only went out with you to see what this is all about! I like you Mark, but as a friend. Mmm. I don't know why you think that I might be able help, but I'll do what I can. Hmm, maybe I can work on Felix."

"Thanks, Fi."

He gave her a kiss on the cheek, and this time she let him. It was just a friendly kiss.

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Jess and Fi had become firm friends. They were always in each other's rooms and quite often ate together. They swapped clothes. They ate instant noodles when they were short of cash. Part of it was because they were doing the same course, but they had different tutors and were in different project teams, so it wasn't just that.

Much of the time Felix joined them, and sometimes they all studied in the library. There was some connection between Felix and Jess that Fi didn't understand at first. She thought that, maybe, Felix wanted to go out with Jess, but then it clicked. They acted like brother and sister. Felix was very protective of her, while she, like any sister with a protective brother, wanted to stand up for herself. It was subtle, but it was there.

Fi turned her suspicion into a joke and got a curious reaction. Jess and Felix looked at each other for a moment too long before they laughed.

"I can see why you would think that, Fi. No, we're old, old friends," said Felix. "We've played together since we were kids. Even when my family moved away we kept in touch."

But Fi was convinced that there was something else.

Jess was the centre of the solar system that was their little group, though she didn't dominate it. Fi and Felix were planets revolving closely around Jess, while Mark orbited Jess like a comet, in an extended ellipse, sometimes close and sometimes at a distance. Their other friends formed their own little solar systems, and sometimes they were pulled into Jess, Fi, Mark and Felix's group, and sometimes the reverse happened. Of course it wasn't really that simple.

The four of them had formed the habit of having a quiet drink in the bar every Thursday. Friday evening was just too noisy. One Thursday they were talking about the half-term break, which was the next week.

"Oh, I'm going home for a few days," said Fi.

"Do you need a lift to the airport?" asked Felix.

She'd told them that she was an Easterner, so it was a natural question. Felix was the only one of them with a car.

"No, thanks, Felix. I have to stop off at Uncle Han's on the way."

Uncle Han was a friend of her father's and lived in the city. She did intend to visit him, so she wasn't exactly lying.

"Are you guys going home?" she asked.

Mark indicated that he was going to visit his parents, who lived in a town a short flight away.

Felix and Jess gave one another a look. Fi thought that it made them look like conspirators, but maybe that was because she was still trying to find out why Jess had 'dumped' Mark.

"I'm going to visit Felix's family, then I'm going home for a few days. It will be nice to see them all again."

Then she changed the subject.

Jess had seemed a bit disappointed that Fi and Mark had not hit it off, but she also seemed relieved. Fi often caught Mark and Jess quietly holding hands, usually when it was just the four of them, and no others were around. Fi was puzzled and intrigued. She had a plan, but it would have to wait until after the half-term break.

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On the Friday evening, Fi took the bus to Uncle Han's house. She'd known Uncle and Auntie and their kids since her family had started coming up here, when all the kids were quite small. Uncle and Auntie welcomed her with open arms, and so did the two of the kids who were at home. They were roughly the same age as her, of course.

"You'll be going down there, tomorrow?" asked Auntie, as they were eating.

"Yes. Oh, it'll be great to see Mum and Dad again! And the twins, if they are there. And Ishmael!"

"Send our love to Mustapha and Fee, my dear," said Uncle Han. "They must come up for a visit some time. We need to catch up on all their news."

"I will, I will, Uncle!" laughed Fi.

The next morning Auntie brought out Fi's lamp. It didn't look like a lamp, and instead resembled a small brass lighter, but it worked and the flame gave a bit of light, so Fi's family and Uncle and Auntie Han referred to it as a lamp. It was a tradition in Fi's family to have a "lamp" of some sort, because Fi was a Djinn and it was a part of their culture. Fi looked at the lamp and stepped into it.

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"Mum, I'm back!" called Fi. The room that she was standing in could be described as tastefully florid. Reds, browns, yellows, greens and blues swirled everywhere on the curtains, on drapes over the furniture, and especially on the floor.

The carpet was a maze of lines and designs, which became smaller and smaller the closer you looked. A mathematician would be reminded of a fractal. The border of the carpet was made up of broad criss-crossing lines in gold, brown, red and yellow. People had fallen out while discussing the topology of the carpet's border. Heavy gold tassels adorned both ends of the carpet.

The furniture was heavy, highly polished and dark, and the metal objects on the dark sideboard were brass or silver and highly filigreed. There was a large brass and crystal chandelier hanging from the ceiling in the centre of the room. It gave ample light but more modern lights high-lighted the darker corners of the high ceiling. The chairs and sofa were plump, made of soft leather and, Fi knew, comfortable. The cushions were soft and embroidered with exotic images of imaginary creatures.

This décor had surrounded Fi her whole life, so she didn't notice it, but if she had noticed it, she would have wondered about her parents' taste in styles. It was a style that she had seen in friends' houses, of course, but most of Fi's friends' parents were traditionalists.

Fi's parents, however, were not traditional Djinn, and sent their kids away to school and to university 'up there'. Fi's family even went 'up there' to visit Uncle Han and his family, and other friends. Mum's kitchen and Dad's workshop were modern, state of the art 'up there', reflecting their liking for such things.

Fi's mother, Fee, came in from the kitchen, wiping off her hands. Fi knew that she was cooking a 'welcome home' dinner, and her mouth watered. She missed her Mum's cooking.

Fee hugged her daughter and kissed her. Suddenly a ball of energy burst into the room and wrapped up Fi in its arms.

"Fi! Fi! You're home! You're home!"

Fi laughed. "Hi Fish! Have you missed me? My, you've grown since I was last home!"

Fi was closer to her little brother than she was to her twin sisters, although she loved them all, of course. As they were all growing up, while Fau and Fum were toddling around causing mayhem, and her mum was racing around after them, Fi was often left looking after her baby brother, Ishmael. She called him 'Fish' for 'Fishmael' because of all the 'Fs' in the family names.

"So, the twins decided to stay up there with friends, for the holidays?"

"Yes," said her mother, with a little sorrow in her voice. Her sorrow was not for her twins, who would be back at the end of their school term, but so many of the young people down here were going to school and varsity 'up there' and never returning.

"Oh, by the way, Jill's girl, Jenny is engaged to a boy 'up there'. That's another one gone.

Fi was shocked. "Well, you don't have to worry about me. I haven't got a boyfriend up there."

She wondered a little uneasily if she should have added "yet" to that sentence. To take her mind off the topic she told her mother about Jess, Felix and Mark, and their strange little group.

"It sounds like this Jess has a secret. And your friend Felix knows it."

"Yeah. I've talked to Mark about it, but he doesn't know what's going on, and I'll talk to Felix when I go back."

"What about asking Jess directly?"

Fi thought about that. "Well, I've hinted, but she hasn't opened up to me. Should I just drop it, Mum?"

Fee thought about it for a bit. "Well, dear, I don't see any harm in just asking people. You're concerned for your friends. But be careful."

The door opened.

"Dad!" Fi shrieked, and rushed to her father's arms.

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Later the family sat out in the garden, eating Fee's Eastlander style food. Fi looked up to where the moonlets were skidding across the sky. The High Winds swirled, the multiple colours creating moving kaleidoscopic shadows. The Planet rolled in a leisurely way across the sky towards the still glowing horizon where the sun had gone down.

On a globe vine slung between two bristle trees, a monkey mouse swung along smelling each globe fruit with its wriggly nose to see if it was ripe. When it found one to its taste it extended its ovipositor and laid an egg deep within the fruit. It paused before it reached the next globe fruit, and chirruped and listened carefully. A faint chirrup came from afar, and the monkey mouse spread its wings and disappeared into the gloom of a grove of bristle trees further away from the house.

Fi could hear bat owls calling, somewhere out in forest. She'd never seen one of the leathery beasts, but their calls used to send her to sleep when she was small.

She sighed. Why would anyone want to live anywhere else? If only she could bring her friends here, she thought. But that was impossible.

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She returned to university and everything seemed to go back to normal. Jess and Mark shared low key displays of affection, but with some reserve. Fi felt for both of them. She wished that she knew what the barrier was.

Two weeks into the term she asked Felix out on a date. It felt odd, but she'd seen other girls asking boys out, so she did so, after a lot of soul-searching. They decided to go for a meal at a posh restaurant, stretching their student budgets to the limit.

Fi was surprised to find that she enjoyed the night out more than she had expected. They walked home, and somehow she was holding his hand.

"Do you want to ask me something, Fi?" said Felix.

“What?” Fi was momentarily confused.

“Jess?”

“Oh, yes.” It had completely slipped her mind.

“You want to know what I know about Mark and Jess?”

“Oh yes.” Fi felt pretty silly. Was she being that obvious?

“Well, I’m sorry, Fi. I know, but I can’t say. I know she loves him, and I know he loves her, but Jess feels that she can never be with him, in the way that he wants.”

“Poor Mark.”

“Yes, poor Mark, and poor Jess.”

“What about you, Felix?”

“What do you mean?”

“Do you share Jess’ problem? You don’t date and you stay close to her. I joked that you were like brother and sister.”

Felix considered. It was a characteristic of his, that he would ponder a question such as this.

“As you know, we’re definitely not brother and sister. We do come from the same place, and so we were brought up together. Our families are close friends. But, no, I don’t share her problem.”

“Good. Then kiss me.”

“What?!”

“Kiss me!”

So he did.

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When it became obvious that Felix and Fi were dating, Jess was, at first, disapproving, but after a week or two seemed to accept it.

Then one day Fi and Felix were invited to a party. The problem was that Felix had some studying to do, so Fi decided to go with a couple of her girl friends. Felix would meet her there later. All was fine at first, but her friends started dancing with two boys, and she was left alone. She wondered if she had been wise to come without Felix, but got chatting to a boy who she didn’t know well.

Suddenly she started to feel odd. She couldn’t focus and her mind was jumbled.

“Take me home,” she said to the boy, and tried to stand up.

She swayed as the room spun around her, and she felt ill. The boy supported her, half carried her out of the room. She couldn’t make out where they were going, and her legs didn’t want to carry her weight. She concentrated and saw a face she recognized.

“Felix!” she said, or thought she said. “I feel terrible!”

She slumped against a wall and struggled to keep from sliding down it. The party music was making her head pound, and there was shouting and movement. Something smashed. She started to slide down the wall, and Felix reappeared. He said something and helped her out of the house, and when the fresh air hit her she threw up on the lawn. Her head started to clear a little.

“Felix, take me home please?”

She started crying.

“Yeah, my car is down this way. Come on, you can make it!”

He got her into the car and she passed out.

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She woke up in her room next morning, stripped to her underwear, under her duvet. Jess was there looking worried..

Fi groaned. “I feel awful. What happened?”

“You don’t remember?”

Fi dredged through her muddled memory. “I felt ill, at the party. Everything was blurry. Felix was there, and I was sick. I don’t remember anything else.”

“You didn’t take anything?”

“Huh! No! Did Felix say I did?”

“No, of course not. Some other boy did, but I don’t believe it. We think that you were drugged.”

“What?!”



“Yeah. Felix says that he couldn’t study, so he went to the party. Some guy was helping you into a bedroom. Felix stopped him, and there was a scuffle. He got you out of there, and called me. We got you into your room. I put you to bed.”

Fi just groaned.

“I’ll leave you now. Get some rest. Felix will be dropping by later.

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She woke up some time later to find Felix watching her.

“Ohhh! Is this what it’s like to have a hangover?”

He smiled. “I don’t know. Water?”

She nodded. “Thanks, Felix. And thanks for saving me.”

She stretched out her hand and held his.

“That’s OK. It’s a good job I couldn’t study. Jess has spoken to Anna and Sue. They’re horrified. They were watching out for you, while they were dancing, but didn’t see anything. They’re going to talk to the boy who you were talking to.”

He ran his index finger over the back of her hand.

“How would you like to meet my parents this weekend?” he asked.

“I’d love to. Sorry Felix, I need to sleep.”

“Sure.” He went to leave then returned and kissed her cheek.

“I must smell horrible,” she said, as she drifted into sleep.

He smiled and left.

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The next day, Fi was feeling much better. She’d showered and was wearing clean clothes, and she’d been to the cafeteria for breakfast. She’d been a bit hesitant about going out alone, but she couldn’t contact Jess, so she screwed up her courage and went. The news of the incident had spread and her friends, both girls and boys, rallied around her and gave her their support.

Jess came to her room after her lecture.

“Don’t worry. I explained to the lecturer that you were sick, and you can copy my notes later.

How are you? Oh, by the way, the boy that you were chatting with? Keith? He wasn’t the one that gave you the drugs. Anna and Sue agree. In fact, he’d helped someone else who got blind drunk at another party. Called her parents and stayed with her until her parents got there. He’s a bit of a star! Felix is mortified that he’d hit him.”

“Felix hit him?”

“Yeah, but they sorted it out. Keith says he doesn’t blame Felix.”

Jess was fidgety, and uncomfortable. She’d never been like this before.

“What’s wrong, Jess. Is it to do with the party?”

Jess laughed.

“No, no! Felix is going to introduce you to his parents,” she said. “Has he mentioned the rest of his family?”

“Oh, so he told you. Yeah, he once mentioned his older sister and brother and their families.”

“Is he going to introduce you to them?”

“He didn’t say. Is there a problem?”

“Probably not. Say, do you want a game of squash?”

Jess had said what she wanted to say, and had relaxed.

“Yeah, sure. But let’s take it easy today,” said Fi. “I’ll get changed and see you down there.”

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Fi wandered down to the squash courts, thinking. Felix had told Jess that he was going to introduce Fi to his family. Fi was OK with that, but Jess felt the need to warn her about something. She wondered what it was.

She thought about introducing Felix to her own parents and stopped dead. She couldn’t! Felix was from up here and.... Suddenly she couldn’t breathe. That was it! It had to be! Felix and Jess were brought up together. They had separated five years ago when Felix’s family had moved to the city. Jess had a ‘problem’ which kept her and Mark apart, or at least stopped her from getting really

close to him. Felix didn't share Jess' 'problem', but knew about it. But the rest of Felix's family... Jess had implied that there was some problem there. It all fitted!

She phoned Felix. "Can you come to my room? Now? I'm just going to get Jess. If I'm not there, wait, please. It's important."

Fi rushed down to the squash courts and found Jess waiting for her.

"Change of plans," said Fi. "I need you to come to my room, now! Felix is meeting us there."

"Whaaat!?"

"Come on!"

Jess was laughing at first, but soon realized that Fi was serious.

"What's this about, Fi?" she asked as they hurried back to the Halls.

"You'll see."

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They arrived at Fi's room at the same time as Felix and she ushered them in and locked the door.

"You're locking the door, Fi?" asked Felix.

"Yeah, just in case someone decides to visit."

"What's this about?" asked Jess. She looked worriedly at Felix.

"It's about Felix inviting me to meet his parents. Because you two are close, I'd previously asked him if he shared your issue, the one that is keeping you and Mark apart."

"Issue'!" snorted Jess.

"Yeah," said Fi. "I hate seeing you so sad when Mark is around. You're both sad! Anyway, Felix said that he didn't have that issue, but, Jess, you were concerned about his other family. His sister and brother. I'm guessing that they haven't moved away from where you both grew up."

"Then I thought about Felix inviting me to meet his parents, and that I would want to invite Felix to meet mine, some time. I was shocked. I couldn't! And immediately I saw that I was behaving exactly like you did, Jess. And I remembered that Felix said that his family had moved to the city five years ago."

"But it can't..." said Jess.

"Oh, Jess, I hope that I'm right! If I'm wrong, well, I might scare you so much that you might not want to know me. If that happens I will have to leave university and go home."

"Stand up," she commanded, "and hold hands! I'll have to do this without my lamp, so I'll have to concentrate. Where do you and Felix come from, Jess? Please tell me! I know where you say you are from, but I don't believe it"

Jess looked worried, and so did Felix, Fi noticed.

"I c-can't," said Jess. "You wouldn't believe me."

Fi nodded. Jess had not denied that Fi was right.

"I believe you. I think that I know why you think that you can't tell me. I know, because I come from here!"

She stepped. They were standing on a huge rock which jutted out of a dark green forest. The top branches of the trees were spiky, but this didn't seem to affect the leathery winged 'birds', which flitted in and out of the seemingly dangerous branches. There were small monkey-like creatures clambering about in the trees, and now and then one would leap from its tree, extend its wings, and glide to another. Then a whole family or tribe would follow it, chit-chattering as they did so.

It was daytime in Fi's home space, and the swirling High Winds were muted by the daylight. An occasional moonlet could be seen zipping across the sky, but most of them were hidden by the glare of the sun. But while the sun reigned supreme, the Planet staked its claim to the other side of the sky. Even washed out by the sun, the Planet impressed with its sheer size. The rings seemed close enough to touch.

Jess and Felix stood there amazed. Fi calmed down, and wondered if she had guessed wrong. But her friends didn't seem shocked. Yes, though they were surprised.

"Wow!" said Jess, after about two or three minutes. "That's amazing! But this isn't..."

"... isn't like where you come from?"

“Yes. This is a different world, isn’t? I didn’t know that there were more worlds than our world and ‘up there’!”

“Some friends of my Dad know all about them. They call them ‘spaces’, not ‘worlds’,” said Fi.

“Do you think that we could go to see them? I mean, they might be able to help...”

“... with the Mark situation? Maybe. Anyway, do you want to meet my parents? Hold hands.”

The trio linked hands and suddenly the top of the rock was empty once more.

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The man was weeding his garden. He tossed the weeds into a barrow that stood close at hand, and hummed quietly to himself. Now and then he would look at a plant, and maybe snip off a branch or a shoot, or pull off a dead leaf. He talked to the plants as he tended to them. He seemed to be in no hurry.

One minute he was alone, and the next minute he had three visitors. He didn’t seem surprised. He stood up and pulled off his gloves and laid them in the barrow, ready for when he could get back to the weeding.

“Hullo. Let’s go into the house, and you can tell me about your problem. I’ll make you a cup of tea.”

It was difficult to work out how old he was. He wasn’t young, and he wasn’t old, but he had the air of a great age. Fi knew that he was the Mage, of course, but the last time she had seen him she was around eleven years old. He had worn his robes the few times that he had visited Fi’s parents, but at the moment he was wearing denim jeans and a red and black flannel shirt. Fi vaguely remembered him teaching her how to perform card tricks on one visit or another. The Mage made them tea and they settled down to chat.

“Well, Fi, how are you? You’re up at university, I understand. I don’t know your friends, do I? From university, too? Hmm, well, my wife would be interested to meet them, but she’s gone to the market in town.”

Fi introduced Felix and Jess. The Mage shook hands with them, and his eyes widened a little.

“So, you are not from up here, are you? Though you’ve both been up here for a while, I think. You two don’t come from Fi’s ‘down there’ either, do you? Though your space is definitely ‘down there’ from here. I don’t think we’ve ever visited your space! Do you have a Mage and a Boffin down there?”

“I don’t think so, sir,” said Felix. Fi had explained about the Mage and the Boffin.

“We’ll have to go and visit,” said the Mage. “So, what can I do for you young people?”

Fi explained about Jess and Mark.

“Mark is from up here. Well, the ‘up here’ where we all go to university. He loves her, and she loves him.”

She heard Jess gasp or sob, but didn’t look at her. “She wants to be with him, but she’s afraid that she would have to leave her family to be with him, and never see her home and family again. That’s about it, isn’t it, Jess.”

Jess nodded, dabbing at her eyes.

“I see. Why don’t you take him down there? You’re afraid that he will be shocked and scared, and will leave you?”

Jess nodded. “I didn’t know that we could take him down there, but yes, I am afraid he will be shocked and not want to know me!”

“Well, Jess, if he does love you, he should be able to overcome his fear,” said the Mage.

“Besides, Jess,” said Fi. “Do you want this to go on for ever? With you two neither together nor apart. I’m sure he’s not happy, and neither are you.”

Jess burst into tears. “You’re right. This needs to be sorted, one way or the other. I’ll take him home tomorrow to meet my parents. ‘Let us eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die’!”

The Mage laughed. “That old saying! I’ve a better idea. Bring him here tomorrow, and we will explain everything. My wife will be here, and she loves baking scones for visitors!”

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Mark walked slowly towards the airline gate, trailing his suitcase behind him. He'd made a decision. He wanted to be with Jess, but she wouldn't let him be with her. She had reasons which she wouldn't share with him, but she couldn't bring herself to push him away completely, and he couldn't live like that. Just before he reached the gate he heard someone call, and he turned.

It was Fi. She had out-sprinted Jess and Felix who were following in her wake. She grabbed him and held him tight. She was crying.

"You can't go, you can't go. Just when we had got it sorted out. You can't go. Jess will be desolated!"

She stepped aside, which was just as well, as Jess came barrelling past and wrapped herself around Mark. She hugged him hard.

"Mark, Mark, one more chance? Please. Please!" she begged, tears coursing down her cheeks.

Mark moved towards the gate, then changed his mind. He grabbed Jess' hand and turned to the woman at the gate.

"Sorry, ma'am. I'm not travelling today."

The woman looked at him as if he was a cockroach, crawling out from under a fridge.

"I'll mark you as a 'no show' then, sir," she said with ice in her voice.

Mark said "Yes, please."

He didn't notice her tone. He turned and with his arm around Jess, followed Felix and Fi out of the airport.

"Well, really!" said the gate clerk.

Then she relaxed and shrugged. "Probably students!"

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"What's this all about, guys?" asked Mark. He'd noticed that Fi had locked her door.

"Do you love me, Mark?" asked Jess.

"To the ends of the earth," said Mark.

He noticed that his friends looked worriedly at each other. Now, why would that bother them?

"Mark, I love you, and what is going to happen next may shock you. I hope that you still love me after it is over."

He just wondered what she meant. They all stood up, so he did too, and they all joined hands.

"Just stay calm," said Fi.

Suddenly they were no longer in Fi's room, but were standing in a garden in front of a cottage. A man in robes, with long hair and a beard, was standing in the doorway of the cottage. Mark felt like he had been punched in the gut.

"What the ...." he said.

"Come in everyone," said the Mage, "and meet my wife."

Mark was moving like an automaton as he and his friends entered the cottage. A woman was waiting for them. She was wearing jeans and shirt, with a white coat over the top.

"Please sit down," she said. "Who wants a scone? Tea anyone?"

The Mage said "Hullo, Mark. I'm the Mage. I've met your friends, and I'm pleased to meet you. May I introduce my wife, the Boffin, to you all?"

The Boffin said "Don't worry about the titles. We are just here to help you with your problem. Mark, I know that you are at university with your friends. What is your speciality?"

"Medicine, ma'am. I want to go into psychiatry."

He was still shaking.

"Just call me 'Boffin'," said the Boffin. "He's one of yours, dear."

"Yes, my dear," said the Mage. "I'd guessed that. Well, Mark, you were somewhere else, then you were here. What do you think of that?"

"I'm shocked." He held Jess' hand to stop his shaking. "I don't know what to think. I don't believe I'm hallucinating. I trust my friends. Did I fall asleep?"

"OK. Have you heard of the 'Many Worlds Theory'? That theory or conjecture states that there are many worlds, and this is only one of them?"

“Yes,” said Mark, “but isn’t that something to do with probabilities? There’s a split whenever there are two probable outcomes.”

“My wife would express it in equations, but, basically, we don’t believe that there is a split as such. We believe that all possibilities exist all the time, in a manner of speaking. We call them ‘spaces’.”

“So, when we came here, we came from the university ‘probability’ to this ‘probability’?” asked Fi. “But you don’t think that my family’s space is one of those ‘spaces’?”

The Mage nodded. “Yes, more or less, Fi. But I’ll talk about your space later. Mark, what do you think so far?”

“Who are you people? Fi, Jess, Felix. I thought that you were ordinary people? What are you?”

The Boffin laughed. “They are ordinary people. The Mage and I are too, underneath it all. We call the way that we get from space to space ‘stepping’. Fi stepped here, bringing you all with her. But anyone can step. Even you, Mark.”

“What? I can do it too?”

The Mage smiled. “Anyone can, but most people don’t know how. Any sentient species can step, and some semi-sentient species too. We, the Boffin and I, think that stepping was as common as walking at one time, but people forgot how to do it, over time. Some people do it by accident, and their experiences are the basis of some folk-tales and legends.”

“Fi’s case and the case of Felix and Jess are slightly different,” said the Boffin. “Imagine that all the spaces correspond to points on a line. You can step left or step right, along the line. At one time we thought that that was the only direction you could step in, so we were astounded when we met Fi’s father, Mustapha. He stepped in a different direction. He stepped ‘in’, in a direction that was not along the line, in a manner of speaking.”

“We call it ‘down’ to get home and ‘up’ to get here,” said Jess. “We use a ‘talisman’ to help us.”

The Boffin nodded. “Yes, and Fi has her ‘lamp’. But she doesn’t need it. We didn’t know that when we met her Dad, Mustapha, but we found it out later. You can get home without your ‘talisman’ if you have to, right? It just helps.”

Jess and Felix looked at each other. “We didn’t know that,” said Jess. “It’s good to know.”

“So, Mark, do you want to learn to step? It might help you get your head around all this.”

Mark nodded.

“Right. Let’s all stand up and join hands. Mark, just watch me closely, as I take you to ‘somewhere else’. Feel how I do it!”

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When those who know how to step do it, they try to step to somewhere quiet, like a basement, or a locked room, or somewhere in the open where people don’t usually go. When someone has been spotted stepping, it has often resulted in confusion and disbelief, and the odd ghost story.

The Mage and the rest stepped onto the top of a large rock in the middle of a large flat grassy plane. Trees dotted the plane, as did other rocky outcrops like the one that they were on. A herd of herbivores stretched as far as the eye could see, all casually cropping the grass and streaming past the outcrop. There were mothers with their offspring, large bulls, and many others who were not yet fully grown.

Mark could see that the animals were not like cattle, but instead resembled large lizards, with scaly skin, and flaps beside their heads. Now and then a big male would shake his head at another and growl. The flaps would become erect, showing a glowing red colour, which presumably warned the other male to keep his distance.

Three dragons appeared from the heights where they had been circling, and flew low over the herd. The herbivores started to run. The dragons were obviously working together, separating out some of the creatures from the rest. There was chaos and the prey animals surged first in this direction and then that. Then one of the dragons dropped out of the sky, its strong jaws clasp an unfortunate creature by the neck and killing it. The other two dragons settled down to eat their share. Smaller flying reptilian creatures circled above the feast waiting for the dragons to finish.

Ground dwelling creatures appeared from somewhere and circled around the feeding dragons, hoping to steal a bite or two when the dragons had eaten their fill.

“Do you think that you could take us back, Mark?” asked the Boffin.

“I don’t know. I sort of felt how you did it. Let’s try.”

They all joined hands, but Mark wasn’t able to step back, and finally the Mage took them back.

“Let’s just you and me try this time, Mark,” said the Mage. “Feel it. Don’t force it.”

They disappeared.

“More tea, anyone,” said the Boffin. “Scone?”

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Mark and the Mage stepped to a high peak. The space was much like the dragon space, but no living creature could be seen. They could breathe the air, so there must be life somewhere, but the mountain seemed barren.

“This is a unique space,” said the Mage, “but we don’t have time to look around. Did you feel how we did it?”

“Not really,” said Mark. “Are you sure that I can do this?”

“Yes. It’s a state of mind. If you doubt, you will find it harder. Here’s the next place we will try.”

The Mage held his hands and visualized their next stop.

“I see,” said Mark. “Let me try it again.”

But he couldn’t manage it.

“Concentrate,” said the Mage, as he stepped them to the target space. “Don’t take any notice of what the space looks like. It’s irrelevant.”

But Mark couldn’t help it. They were on the top of a huge sand dune. A stiff wind carried grains of sand over the lip the dune, as it slowly migrated in the direction the wind was blowing. A lizard-like creature scuttled over the lip and glided down the face of the dune. A twitch and it disappeared into the loose sand.

“It’s hard,” said Mark, laughing.

“Right, here’s the next one,” said the Mage. Mark got the feeling that he was prepared to carry on until Mark got it.

“OK. Got it,” said Mark. He had the feeling that he was going to get it this time, but he still couldn’t do it.

“Nearly,” said the Mage. “You made me feel it, but you didn’t quite take us there. Let’s try it together.”

Mark nodded. He felt that he was making progress. He didn’t know why he felt that, but he did.

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About fifteen minutes after they left, Mark and the Mage returned.

“I did it!” said Mark. “I brought us back! It’s so easy once you know, isn’t it?”

Jess clasped him to her. “Oh, I knew you could do it. But you are one up on me! I’ve only ever stepped to home and back.”

Mark hugged her. “So, can I meet your parents, now?”

“Well, my talisman is back in my room... Oh, but wait! The Mage says that I don’t need it. I can try without it.”

“May we come too?” asked the Boffin. “We’d like to see your space. It’s different from the usual spaces, and it’s different from Fi’s home space, too. We’re very interested!”

They all joined hands, and Mark said “Right it’s up to you, Jess!”

Everyone laughed.

“No pressure, then,” said Jess.

She composed herself, which was hard without her talisman, then stepped.

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They were on a hill overlooking a city on a bay. At the closer end of the bay a ship was in dock, being unloaded by swinging cranes. At the further end of the bay, yachts bobbed in the marina. The city pressed down to the beach and the onlookers could see the long curve of a raised promenade running along the waterfront. No one spoke for quite a while, and Jess couldn’t bear it.

“What do you think?” she said, in a worried tone.

Mark’s arm went round her waist. “It’s stunning. It’s beautiful.”

She burst into tears. “I’m glad you like it.”

It was a red world. Greens and yellows and blues did exist, but they were secondary to the red part of the spectrum. The red shades did not dominate. They were subtle and restrained, more pink than ruby, for example. Blooms were white, blue, yellow, and green, and provided splashes of colour. Grasses were a pale to dark pink, with a tinge of green, while trees edged towards darker shades of red. Green, yellow, and blue fruit provided colour contrasts in the canopy and in the bushes. The eye was confused at first, but after a little while, it adapted, and things seemed less strange.

The city extended up the hill, and they were in the garden of a large house, made of a reddish brown material. Similar houses surrounded them.

“Come and meet my family,” said Jess, leading them up to the house.

“Welcome,” said Jess’ Mum. “What a crowd! Come in and have some tea.”

She was an older and more compact version of Jess, red-headed and freckled. The Boffin went to her and hugged her.

“I know you,” said the Boffin.

“And I know you, dear,” said Jess’ Mum.

Jess’ Dad was tall and fair. His long beard was almost white, as was his hair. The Mage shook his hand.

“Felix!” said Jess’ Dad. “We haven’t seen you for a while. Your parents send us reports of your progress, and they say you are doing well, and it looks like you are.”

Felix had his arm around Fi, and Jess’ Dad was looking at her. Felix blushed a bright crimson.

“I’m fine, thanks, Uncle,” he said.

They settled down with their tea and biscuits.

“So,” said the Mage. “You sent Felix and Jess to university ‘up there’ as an experiment?”

“Yes,” answered Jess’ Dad, “We’ve always known about ‘up there’, but no one that we know of has lived up there for any length of time. Of course, our people must have come from there originally, but we don’t know when or why. It’s lost in the mists of time. But the universities ‘up there’ are better than the ones that we have here at the moment, so we sent Jess and Felix to school up there and then to university. Felix’s people moved up there, so that they could support Jess and Felix.”

“But you didn’t guess that Felix and Jess might fall for people from up there?”

“No, and we should have. It doesn’t matter too much, though.”

He smiled at Mark.

“Er, I’m not from ‘up there’,” said Fi.

She looked apprehensive, and the Mage explained. The Boffin and Jess’ Mum started discussing “orthogonal spaces, vector spaces, manifolds, multiple dimensions and ‘zeros of space-time functions’”. Everyone else ignored them.

“My people are called Djinnns,” said Fi. “I have a ‘lamp’ that I use to help me step back home. In the olden days, people used to rub a Djinn’s lamp and be granted three wishes, but these days, most of us have disabled that feature of our ‘lamps’.”

“Felix and Jess’ people are known up there, it seems,” said the Mage. “Can you put these images up, my dear?”

He gestured to his wife. She took out her pocket device and project the images on the wall. The pictures were of Jess and Felix.

“Now look,” he said, waving his hands.

The images were enhanced.

“A devil and an angel,” gasped Fi. The whiteness of Felix’s skin was brought out by the enhancement, and Jess’ red hair and fair colouration was strikingly reddened.

“Some ancient war spilled over to ‘up there’ perhaps?” said the Mage.

Jess’ Dad nodded. “Yes, we believe so. But that was a long time ago.”

He smiled at his red-headed wife, and she smiled back.

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Jess and Mark were on the terrace of her parents' house. They watched the red tinted sun descend and the stars come out. There were not the millions of stars that were visible in the night skies 'up there' but there were many of them, forming chains and clusters across the sky. There was no equivalent of the Milky Way, though. A large moon, about half the size of the moon 'up there', rose swiftly. Mark had expected that a moon in this space would be some shade of red or pink, but this moon had a pale blue tint. He wondered a little how that worked, but gave up.

He held Jess in his arms and kissed her.

"Mmm. Again," she said, so he did.

"My little devil," he said, and she laughed.

"What do you think of this 'spaces' and 'stepping' thing?" she asked.

"I was confused and shocked at first, but when the Mage was stepping between spaces, teaching me to step, I got used to it. It started to seem natural, and I think that was what allowed me to help us step. Then I did it by myself!"

"You know," he said, "while we were practising stepping, we visited some fascinating spaces. Glorious cities. Fantastic natural phenomena. Weird creatures and plants. I'd like to see more. The Mage told me that there is a community of 'steppers', people who, for whatever reason, continually step between spaces, stopping here or there for a few months or a year, and then moving on. What do you think, Jess? When we have graduated, shall we become 'steppers', at least for a while?"

She kissed him.

"Well, I haven't seen what you have seen. I've only stepped between here and 'up there'. Oh, and to Fi's home space. And the Mage and the Boffin's space, I suppose. And the dragon space. Actually, that's quite a few. I didn't realize!"

"One space was a huge ocean," said Mark, gesturing. "I didn't see any land. The Mage supported us on an invisible platform above the waves. Some of the inhabitants of the space noticed us and came to look at us. They looked like huge eels. One looked at me with its huge eye, and opened its mouth and breathed on me. Its breath was really fishy! The Mage said that they were very friendly and had huge cities down below!"

"It sounds amazing! I'd love to see it. We should make contact with these steppers after the end of term. Maybe take a few short trips just to get ourselves used to stepping. What about getting back?"

"Oh, the Mage says that you can always step back to your home space."

She kissed him. "Let's see if we can find some of these steppers, then. Let's find out what it's like. But first, kiss me again."

So he did.

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