

The Mage and the Boffin



by Cliff Pratt

The Mage and The Boffin

by Cliff Pratt

© 2020 Cliff Pratt
Cover art © 2020 Cliff Pratt
All rights reserved.

Licence Note

All rights reserved. Please enjoy this book, but please don't take copies of it, and give it to people. Feel free to direct friends to my site where they can download a copy for themselves.

By this Author

The Last Beautiful Woman (available in digital and paperback formats)

How I Wrote and Self Published My First Book (available in digital format)

The Mage and The Boffin (available in digital format, published Oct 2018)

The Mage and Boffin Part One and Part Two (available in paperback format, hardcopy of the above book in two parts)

The above books can be found on [Amazon](#) (paperbacks) or your favourite digital book store.

Author and Publisher Details

Published by Cliff Pratt

Author : Cliff Pratt

Email : enkidu@cliffp.com

Or : enkiduonthenet@gmail.com

Website : <https://www.cliffp.com/my-writing>

Introducing the Mage and the Boffin

“How would you introduce yourself to a reader, my dear?” asked the Mage.

“Mmm, you mean someone has written about us?” said the Boffin.

“You know they have. Many people have over the years. They’ve called us by different names, it’s true.”

“Well, I’m a scientist, hence ‘the Boffin’, and my powers are the powers of Science. It’s obvious isn’t it?”

“What about me?”

“Your field is magic, hence ‘the Mage’ Your powers are based in Magic.”

“Yes. Always the obvious answer! Is that all?”

“What do you mean? I’m a scientist and you’re a magician. That’s true, isn’t it?”

“What about logic, philosophy, feelings, thoughts, mathematics, mind, biology, babies, medicine, dragons, kings and queens, politics.”

“Oh I see. Well, there is a blurry area, I suppose. But I started out as a physicist, of course. Pure science. Measurements and observations. Theories and hypotheses. Before we got our powers.”

“And now? After all the years that you’ve known me? Has that changed your view of yourself and the world? What about me and our kids? Do you measure and observe us?”

“The truth? Well, I wouldn’t be me if I didn’t measure and observe! But it doesn’t stop me from loving you all.”

“Would it surprise you that I also measure and observe you and our kids?”

“No, it wouldn’t surprise me. But you aren’t so interested in theories as I am. You’re more interested in connections, relationships, the mind and consciousness, and that sort of stuff. You measure things in a different way. We are both highly logical people, but I thought that you weren’t when we met. That was just plain prejudice, though, because we were on opposite sides in a war! So, to answer your earlier question, yes, knowing you has changed my view of myself and others.”

“There’s not much difference between our fields, then?” he said teasingly.

She smiled and took him seriously, as he knew she would, and considered.

“Well,” she said, “not as much as one might think. But I’m interested in analysis, you’re interested in synthesis. I’m interested in objects, you’re interested in feelings. I talk in terms of neurones, and you talk about motives and intentions. We have much the same interests, but we look at things differently. I’m generalizing, of course.”

“It’s interesting that I am the one asking the questions and you are the one answering them,” he said.

Once again, she took him seriously.

“Yes,” she nodded. “That is a good indication of how we work together. You spot the problems, and suggest solutions. Then I implement them.”

“Don’t you mean that you go rushing in there headlong?”

She sniffed and said “You might think that, and you might not be totally wrong.”

She tried not laugh, but couldn’t help it.

“But you yourself don’t hold back, and we always present a united front,” she added.

He nodded his agreement.

“What sort of stories should be written about us, dear?” she asked.

“And our family and friends. They’ll be there too.”

“Yes, true. We will only be bit players in some of the tales.”

“What sort of stories’? We go back a long time, so the older stories will seem strange to people these days, if they are told exactly as they happened. People trapped by spells in trees and so on. So stories from the earlier times might best be written like folk-tales or fairy stories. But the stories from more modern times can be written in a more modern style. It doesn’t make a lot of difference, though, so long as they tell the stories properly.”

“Should the stories explain the science and the magic, do you think?” she asked.

“Only when necessary. The science doesn’t much differ from the modern science in practical ways. It depends a lot on measurements and physical devices. The magic will just confuse people, these days, because they aren’t used to thinking in magical terms, and because of that, it won’t make sense to them. And if the author tried to explain how our powers are related to the fields which we represent, the author would need to write a whole extra book.”

“True. We’ve only worked out about sixty to seventy per cent of how our powers work ourselves. That reminds me. We should write down what we know for our successors, but it isn’t really part of our stories, is it?”

“Good idea. But what about us personally? Our looks?”

“Well, you’re a tall, handsome man. You wear ordinary slacks and shirts most times these days, but sometimes you wear the full regalia, the long robes, and carry a rod or wand. You rarely wear a hat but sometimes have a hood. You have long sensitive fingers and have a full beard and tend to wear your hair longish. Your skin is light brown, a bit lighter than mine, and your eyes are deep, deep brown. And I love you dearly. What about me?”

“You are the glow of a sunrise, the tinkle of water in a stream, and the warmth of a fire in winter, and I love you dearly.”

She gave him a look, and he sighed.

“OK, OK! For the record! You are a beautiful brown skinned woman, quite slender, with long brown hair (usually!). You generally wear shirts and slacks like me. On rare occasions, you wear a dress and scrub up quite well!”

“Hey!” she interjected.

“Sometimes you wear a white coat and I’ve known you wear eye glasses for effect. You are marvellous with kids, especially babies, and at one time we were barely ever without one around. Ours, or someone else’s. In spite of your calling you are emotional and caring, and more than a little impetuous. However, if you are deep in the throes of an experiment or serious study, you can be extremely uncommunicative and distracted, to the point of being antisocial.”

“Wow! What about us as a couple?” she asked.

“We definitely complement each and together we are stronger than either of us alone. We share a lot of traits in common. You called me a synthesist but I can be analytical, like now. I’m the one who is supposed to be emotionally driven and impulsive, but you excel in those areas! You’re not afraid to use magic, and I use science when it is appropriate. You worried at one time that we were becoming too alike. Or was that me? Neither of us want to rule the world, but both of us like to be in control of the situation.”

“What about our ‘powers’?”

“We get our powers as a consequence of our roles. Yours are based on your role as focus of Science, and usually, but not always, you use a ‘device’ of some sort. I am the focus of Magic, and I don’t usually use a device, but frequently use gestures and signs. I like to hold something, though. Sometimes the effects of our different powers are pretty much the same. We try to use our powers as little as possible, because as often as not complications arise.”

“Mmmm. Are we nice people?”

She stroked his beard and he kissed her.

“I think that people would say we are,” he said. “Of course, we are forceful at times. The roles require it now and then. But we are sociable people and I like our friends and I think that they like us.”

She nodded and sighed. He put his arm round her, and she leant against him. She curled her legs up on the sofa, and the two of them stayed there like that for some time. She opened and read a journal, while the Mage studied patterns in a scrying ball. Two of the most powerful people in many worlds, (or, as they would say ‘spaces’), just relaxing at home.

The King Gets What He Wants

There once was a land divided. Each small Kingdom fought against all the other small Kingdoms, and as is usual in such cases, the people suffered. They died as armies fought over their towns and starved as armies criss-crossed their fields and destroyed their crops. Their children died as the Kings and Queens enlisted them into their armies by force.

The Mage and the Boffin watched this from their safe space. Their three sons watched as well, and were horrified.

“Please do something, Dad. Make them stop, Mum,” their eldest begged.

“Yes, we need to do something, my dear.” said the Mage. “But what?”

“I know,” said his wife, the Boffin. “We’ll make a safe space, like this one, and we’ll invite all the Kings and Queens there, and when they are there, this is what we’ll do....”

So the Mage created a new safe space, big enough to contain all the Kings and Queens and the Boffin made houses for them to live in, and the Boffin built a large building for the Kings and Queens to gather in. But none of the Kings or Queens would come.

The Boffin sighed. “You’ll have to fetch them, dear.”

So the Mage did. All over the land, the Kings and the Queens disappeared and reappeared in the safe space, and all the wars petered out.

The Mage and the Boffin appeared in front of the Kings and Queens and said “You are our guests for as long as it takes for you to make peace.”

“Peace? I’ll give you peace,” said one King.

He drew his sword and charged the Mage and the Boffin and brought it down on the Mage’s head, but the sword passed through him as if he was made of air.

The Mage sighed. “I’m not actually here. What you see is a hologram created by the Boffin. And I have just cast a spell on this space, so that weapons cannot be used. If you try to use a weapon, it will burn you.”

The King’s sword became red-hot, and he dropped it.

“We’ll not be forced to make peace by you! We’ll break out and raise armies and kill you!” he raged.

It took a year and a day. At first the Kings and Queens fought each other, wrestling and punching, since they couldn’t use weapons, but this was undignified and didn’t solve anything. They tried to escape, building ladders and digging tunnels, but they couldn’t get out of the safe space. So they started talking to one another, started forming groups and alliances, and eventually, they came together in one big Parliament and made peace.

The Kings and Queens rejoiced and the Mage and the Boffin commended them. They sent the Kings and the Queens back to their homes, and the people rejoiced. Everyone laid down their weapons.

However, one King had a sliver of hatred in his heart hidden so well that the Boffin could not detect it with her instruments, and the Mage could not see it with his charms and spells. The King’s armies cruelly ravaged all the Kingdoms and welded all the Kingdoms into one nation which the King ruled by force, savagely.

“That wasn’t supposed to happen,” said the Mage to the Boffin.

“We will have to do something about it,” said the Boffin, but before they could decide what to do, the King summoned them.

“I have your sons,” he said, gesturing.

A screen was drawn aside and their three sons stood there in chains.

The Boffin gave him a look which chilled him to the core. “You had better not harm a hair of their heads, or you will have me to reckon with. **AND TAKE THOSE CHAINS OFF!**”

The King gestured and the chains were removed.

The King said “You will now perform three tasks for me, and I will release one of your sons as each task is completed. Your first task is to build me a castle, one that surpasses all other castles in the country. It must be impregnable.”

The Mage and the Boffin worked away together for a month and a day, and produced an oval object the size of a football.

When they presented it to the King, he said, “What is this?”

The Boffin said “It’s the egg of your castle. Put it where you want the castle to be, tap it gently three times and it will grow into the castle. It will take a year and a day to complete.”

The King was pleased and took the egg to the top of a ridge which ran down the side of a mountain close by. He carefully placed the egg and rapped it three times. The egg flowed outwards and formed a platform, the platform extended sideways, and walls started to grow out of the platform. Everything was a brilliant white to start with, but hints of colour started to appear. The material of the Castle merged into the rocks of the mountain. A darker rectangular area on a wall grew protrusions, and turned into a door. The King stepped up to it and pulled it open. He laughed with joy.

“You can have your youngest son back in a year and a day,” said the King.

The Mage and the Boffin looked at each.

“Don’t worry,” called the eldest son. “We’ll be OK.”

“It might do them some good,” said the Boffin, “They will be safe.”

So they let the King keep the boys.

After a year and a day the Mage and the Boffin were called to the King’s presence. The three sons were standing by his side.

“I release your youngest son, as agreed,” said the King.

“We agreed to nothing,” said the Boffin coldly, and the King wisely decided not to comment.

The youngest son walked over to his mother and father.

“Are you OK, my son?” asked the Mage.

The boy nodded. “We’re OK. We mostly lived with the King’s son and his daughter. His son is nice, and made us as welcome as he could. His daughter is OK for a girl, too.”

The Mage and the Boffin smiled.

“The next thing that I want, is to be able to fly from one end of the Kingdom to the other. When I can do that, you can have your middle son back.”

The Mage looked at the Boffin. “Can you handle this one, my dear?”

“Yes, of course. It will take me three months and a day.”

So the Boffin retreated to her workshop. Crashing and banging could be heard, and the sounds of drills and saws. The bright flashing light of welding torches leaked from the cracks around doorways and the shuttered windows. After three months and a day she rolled a machine out of her workshop. It had an engine at the front to pull it through the air and great solid wings to hold it up in the sky.

“Here are the plans for the machine,” she said handing them to the King. “I’ve trained one of your pages to fly it, and it will go from one end of your Kingdom to the other in about a day. Now give me back my son.”

“Not so fast,” said the King.

He jumped in the machine with the page and the page flew the machine round and round the Palace, then back to where the Mage and the Boffin were waiting.

“I suppose you fulfilled my request,” he said grudgingly. “I release your middle son.”

And the middle son was allowed to join his parents and his younger brother.

“How are you, my love?” his mother asked.

He nodded. “Pretty good. The King’s son was kind to us and helped us with our homework. His sister is quite nice too. We played together a lot. She’s good at chess and badminton.”

The King was not happy. “I wanted to fly like a bird. I didn’t want a machine. So my last request, for your oldest son, is for you to make me able to fly like a bird.”

“Hmm, are you sure?” asked the Mage.

“Of course I’m sure,” raged the King. “Just do it.”

The Mage went away and toiled for a month and a day. Pungent smells and clouds of multi-coloured smoke rolled from his laboratory. Bubbling and hissings could be heard, and he sent out for some quicksilver and the venom of a cobra. Once more he and his family stood before the King.

“In this syringe I have a medicine which will allow you to fly like a bird, with wings. Are you sure that you want me to inject you with it?”

The King bared his arm and said “Inject away.”

“This will take a while to work,” said the Mage, as he injected the King.

“How long,” said the King suspiciously.

“A few months.”

“‘A few months’! Well you don’t get your son back until it works!” ranted the King.

The Boffin looked at the Mage.

“Give it a week,” he reassured her.

Sure enough, a week later the King called the Mage and the Boffin and their two sons in front of him. Their oldest son still stood alongside the King.

“Why am I so tired? Why am I eating so much? What is happening to me?” the King complained.

“Well, the food is a fuel for the process, and the tiredness is your body preparing for the process.”

“Process? What process?”

“Metamorphosis. You will go to sleep while your body transforms. You will grow claws, your jaw will lengthen and you will grow extra teeth. You will get an extra heart and bigger lungs. Your arms will become wings.”

“You’re turning me into a monster?” screamed the King. But he didn’t have the energy to maintain his rage, and fell back into his seat. “So tired. But at least I have your son!”

The Boffin waved her hand in a pattern, and suddenly her son was by her side. She was not afraid to use magic when necessary.

“How are you, son?”

“Pretty good, Mum. The King’s son looked after us. We played soccer and swam in the pool. The King’s daughter is amazing. She has long dark hair and her skin is as smooth as silk and as dark as chocolate. Her eyes are brown and as deep as a pool. She’s kind and generous and...”

He looked like he could go on for a long time, but his mother stopped him.

“Your Majesty, you are not changing into a monster. You are changing into a dragon, a noble creature. It’s the only creature as big as a man which can fly, though it needs physics to achieve that.”

“Physics?”

“Or magic. They’re much the same thing. You wanted, no, you demanded the ability to fly like a bird, and that is what we have given you.”

“Reverse it!”

“I’m sorry, we can’t do that. It’s a one way process.”

“You tricked me! Guards, arrest them!”

The Boffin waved her hands in another pattern, and a shimmer surrounded her and her family.

“We will leave you now, your Majesty,” said the Mage. “Don’t try to stop us and don’t try to find us. You won’t succeed.”

They turned and walked away through the Palace. No one tried to stop them but someone called to them.”

They halted. It was the King’s son, and his sister, the King’s daughter.

“Please, what will happen to our father? I know he isn’t a good man, but he is our father.”

The Mage looked into the Prince’s dark brown eyes, and saw the intelligence there. He saw the compassion and the love for his fellow man in there. The Mage knew that he would make a good King. He held the boy’s dark hand in his pale hand and told him the truth. The Mage judged that he could handle it.

“He will eat more and more, and will become more and more tired and will eventually fall asleep for good. His body will grow a leathery skin, and he will lie there for several months, changing internally. Eventually his body will transform into that of a dragon, and when it is ready the dragon will burst out of the skin. The tiny bit of the King that is left will fly like a bird, with wings. Don’t worry, it isn’t a painful process,” said the Mage.

“It would be best for you to leave the Palace now,” said the Boffin. “If you don’t, he will infect you, and you will ‘pass over’ as he is going to.

The firstborn of all your descendants will also ‘pass over’ if you are infected.”

The Prince looked at the Boffin and the Mage. “He is my father. I must stay around him and help him through it. I’ll take him to his Castle, and he can finish his change up there.”

The Boffin put her hand on his. She was darker skinned than her husband, but her hand was still pale compared to the Prince’s. “You are a brave boy and a much better man than your father. Your own change will happen when you are more than sixty. You have many useful and hopefully happy years in front of you. You will need to repair the damage that your father has done, and govern wisely. I think that you can do that. You will need to search for your bride as soon as you are able, but I assure you that she is out there and you will know her when you meet her. Something will happen.”

“‘Something will happen’?”

She nodded and she and her family walked away. The Boffin’s oldest son kept looking back, and as they were about to take the step into the safe space, he gently waved to the King’s daughter, and she waved back. To the Prince and the Princess it looked as if the Mage and the Boffin and their family had disappeared between one step and the next.

“So, son, how did you find out that the Princess’s skin was as smooth as silk and that her eyes were as deep as a pool?”

“Well, I, errr.... Oh, Mum!”

Golden Hair and the Bears

The Mage and the Boffin had a daughter whose name was originally Jean, but which became Patricia, and then changed to Helga. They weren't sure why her name wouldn't stay the same, so they gave up and nicknamed her "Golden Hair" because of her long blond hair. And the name stuck.

At the time they were not living in their "safe space" but were living in the forests of the North West where there were few people. It was just a step from their home to their "safe space" of course, if they needed it.

Golden Hair loved to be outside and loved roaming the forests. She charmed the wolves and the owls and the reindeer and the caribou and the hawks and the squirrels and all the other non-human inhabitants of the forests.

Her mother, the Boffin, worried about her at first, but made a special device into a necklace and hung it around Golden Hair's neck, and knew that she could contact her daughter any time. The Mage also cast a charm on her to keep her safe and stowed it in the necklace. The charm also made sure that Golden Hair couldn't ever lose the necklace.

Golden Hair ran for kilometre after kilometre with the caribou, or the wolves that trailed them. She cowered under the ground with the mice, and she hovered overhead with the hawks. She hid nuts with the squirrels, and she swam in the streams with the salmon, leaping the waterfalls in a flash of silver.

She understood the cruel truth of death in the forest. The hawk lived by killing the mice and rabbits, and the wolves ate only when they came across a dead reindeer or managed to kill one. When she ran with the wolves, she helped them bring down a reindeer, and when she flew with the hawks, she stooped on the mice and other small animals.

"I'm concerned that she is spending so much time in the forest," said the Boffin one day.

"Don't worry, my dear," said the Mage. "She's learning the way of the world. She can easily catch up with the formal stuff later. She's intelligent enough."

So the Boffin let her daughter spend time in the forest. She just checked with Golden Hair every so often and made her come back for a bath now and then, and only took issue with her when she didn't completely shake off the forest when she came home.

“Golden Hair, you're shedding fur everywhere. And please cut your nails. You're scratching things.”

Golden Hair, who was a good girl, said “Sorry Mum”, then took a shower, unplugged the drain hole, and cut her finger and toe nails. Then she went round the house with the vacuum cleaner.

“Thanks, dear,” said the Boffin and trimmed the golden hair to a reasonable length and brushed it until it gleamed.

“Thanks Mum,” said Golden Hair. “I love you, you know.”

“Of course, dear.”

Of all the animals in the forest, Golden Hair loved the bears the most. In the section of forest closest to home there lived a family of bears, a mother bear and two two-year-old cubs. Golden Hair spent hours and days with the bear family, eating bugs and worms, berries, nuts and seeds. She broke open rotten tree trunks with her strong claws to get at the grubs, and learned with the cubs to catch the salmon leaping up the rapids. She tore into the delicious pink flesh with her strong teeth and squabbled with the cubs for the mother bear's leavings.

She lived with them for so long that she learned the language of the bears, though bears don't talk a lot.

“Why is there no father bear?” she asked the mother bear one day.

The mother bear shook the water from her coat. “I hope he stays a long way away. He would kill the cubs. Do human fathers not kill their cubs?”

Golden Hair was not shocked. Bears were not humans and did things differently.

“Why would he kill the cubs?”

“There's only so much food. And they might grow big enough to kill him or drive him off.”

Golden Hair nodded in the bear fashion. It made sense from the bear point of view.

As Autumn drew on, Golden Hair and the bears started to gorge themselves on whatever they could lay their claws on. When they weren't eating, they were dozing in the sun.

One morning the ground was covered with snow.

"Time to find a place to stay," said the mother bear, leading the cubs and Golden Hair higher into the mountains. They found a place under a jutting rock, and the mother bear nodded in the bear manner.

"This will do," said the mother bear, and she and the cubs and Golden Hair scraped out the uncomfortable pebbles, twigs and other debris and settled down to sleep.

In the night a heavier fall of snow had covered the rock and built up a wall around the bears and Golden Hair. The mother bear stirred and went back to sleep. The cubs and Golden Hair didn't wake.

"Dear, look at this," said the Boffin.

On her screen, Golden Hair's necklace showed the hibernating bears and Golden Hair in the den.

"Do you want me to bring her back?" asked the Mage.

"No, let her sleep. But next spring, she will have to come back and go to school. It's time."

So the bears and Golden Hair slept through the winter, cosy in their den. Golden Hair, since she wasn't a bear, was occasionally a little restless, and woke a little, but the gentle snores of her companions and the warm smelly atmosphere soon sent her off again.

The days passed, the weeks passed, the months passed, and eventually the snug little hollow started to get a little damp as the snow began to melt. The bears and Golden Hair started to stretch and wake. They crawled out of their cosy nest and started to look for food. They found some moss and grass and ate some bark off a tree. Then they happened on a rabbit which had frozen to death, and not been found by anyone else.

The mother bear knew that Golden Hair had to go home, without actually thinking about it like a human would, so she led her cubs and

Golden Hair down to the lowlands and towards Golden Hair's home. In the lower altitudes the spring flush had brought out the flowers and the grass was dense and cushioned the cubs and Golden Hair as they rolled and tumbled through the meadows.

What the mother bear didn't know and wouldn't have understood was that some of the few people who lived in the area had seen Golden Hair and reported the sightings to the Baron.

"Five hundred dollars to the man who brings me the pelt of the golden bear," he declared.

It happened that a young lad of about Golden Hair's age was walking through the forest, with his gun, looking for a turkey for the pot. He was not trying very hard, to be honest, as he didn't like killing things, but he'd shoot, if he stumbled across one.

He heard a crashing through the forest and the golden bear and two other young bears tumbled onto the track, followed by the mother bear who reared up on her hind legs. The boy saw the golden bear and remembered the bounty on its pelt. He raised his gun and shot at the golden bear.

Rings of fire spread from the golden bear and radiated into the universe. The moon glowed slightly more brightly for a second, and the boy found himself looking at a blond girl of about his own age, totally naked except for a necklace, but totally unharmed.

The mother bear lumbered forward and the boy raised his gun again, but his gun was knocked aside. The mother bear dropped to all fours and nuzzled the blond girl.

"She's only checking her out," said the Boffin, tossing a coat to her daughter and getting between her and the boy. "Why did you shoot at my daughter?"

"The, the, the Baron offered five hundred dollars for her pelt," said the lad, suddenly thinking that pelt was not a good word to use in this situation.

"Did he? I'll have to have a word with him," said the Boffin.

The boy was suddenly glad that he was not the Baron. Golden Hair walked up to him, tightening her belt around her waist.

"You're cute," she said.

“Don’t mind her, she’s not completely back in human mode yet,” sniffed the Boffin.

“What’s your name?” said Golden Hair. “I’m Golden Hair.”

“Jack,” said the boy.

So they walked home, with the Boffin resolutely walking between Jack and Golden Hair who kept sneaking looks at each other. The Boffin was not too displeased though, as she realized that it wouldn’t be too hard to persuade Golden Hair to go to school next term.

When they got home, Golden Hair took a shower then came and gave her Mum a hug.

“Mum, the mother bear, when she nuzzled me said ‘It’s over.’ Is it over?”

“Yes, dear, I think it’s over. Now, about school...”

Golden Hair never spent as much time in the woods after that, and she did it as a human. She occasionally came across the mother bear, but they went their separate ways. The two cubs moved away shortly after Golden Hair left the bears, and one spring the mother bear had two new cubs. The mother bear wouldn’t let Golden Hair near them. She said, in bear, “These two don’t know you.”

Golden Hair was thoughtful as she walked home. She found the Boffin and said “Mum, I think that my name is Alice.”

And it stuck.

There's a Dragon on the Roof

One day the Mage came in and said "My dear, there's a dragon on the roof."

"Is there?" said the Boffin.

They both went outside to look.

"What's she doing?" asked the Boffin.

"Not much. I saw her as I came up the track from town. She's not moved much at all."

The dragon scratched herself behind her ear with the tip of her folded wing. She belched loudly, flapped her wings and took off. Flapping lazily she rose into the air and disappeared with a pop. Then she suddenly reappeared and circled to land on the roof again. She shifted from leg to leg, then repeated the whole procedure, this time without the belch.

"She obviously wants something," said the Boffin. "I wonder...."

The dragon took off again and flapped her wings and circled, then disappeared with a pop again. She reappeared and landed on the roof.

"She wants us to follow her," said the Boffin. "I'm sure of it."

She turned around and drew one of her instruments from her pocket. She pressed a button and a shimmer surrounded the house, and the dragon took off with a squawk.

"Oops, sorry dragon," she said.

"That's all locked up, and I've activated your protection charm to be safe," she said to the Mage. "Let's go."

They stepped through to the dragons' safe space. Actually, reflected the Mage, it was probably their original space. Gravity was weaker here, and the light a little dimmer than nighttime back home, but not by much. Two moons moved slowly through the sky and a smaller moon raced past them at a much faster pace. Ponderous clouds moved sluggishly across the sky. Stars crawled across the sky as the planet turned slightly faster than back home.

"Hmm, nighttime. Do we travel now or wait for dawn?" wondered the Boffin.

“She seems to want us to go now.”

They had stepped across onto a reasonably flat peak and the dragon was perched on a neighbouring spire of rock. She took off and flew to another peak further away, then back again. No longer mute in her home space she trumpeted, but neither of them could yet speak dragon.

“Come on then,” said the Boffin and stepped over the edge of the precipice. As she fell she opened her wings and changed her fall into a sweeping glide. She caught an updraft and swooped up to land on a peak next to the dragon.

“I wish she wouldn’t do that,” thought the Mage as he opened his wings and flew across to perch near her.

They couldn’t talk or think human thoughts easily while they had the shape of dragons, of course, but they could understand dragon. The dragon indicated something very important was happening and that they should follow her. They all took off and headed in a direction that the Mage somehow knew was roughly north, or would have known if he was thinking the human way.

Gravity was weaker here and didn’t drag the mountains down as much as it did at home, so there were high cliffs and deep steep sided valleys, incredibly steep scree slopes, tall spindly spires of rock, arches worn by the wind and rocks balanced in positions which would be impossible back home.

Water still flowed downhill, of course, but it did so in a much more leisurely way than it did back home. It was as if it wore seven league boots. It produced great spumes as it tumbled slowly downhill towards the seas and great slow falling fountains when it hit submerged rocks.

The three dragons wheeled and turned through the canyons and gulleys as if they were linked together. The Mage could sense the Boffin’s exhilaration as they twisted and turned. She loved this space, and the freedom of flight. In the small part of him that was still human he hoped that she would not let it go to her head, as the last time that they had ventured into this space and had flown with the dragons, she had returned home with a shoulder sprain.

They flew through the night. At one point their guide dropped down to an alpine pasture and all three dragons tore great bunches of foliage from the spindly bushes and trees. The taste made the human part of him think

of mint and parsley, with a hint of resin. Small bat like creatures, this space's birds, flew away squeaking as the three big reptiles ripped up their habitat, and wingless small reptiles ran like chickens from the destruction. The dragons ignored them.

As the sun rose, its pink halo rose first, then the main yellowish body of the sun followed. The ponderous clouds swelled and billowed, rain drifted down rather than fell, dampening the jungles of the lowlands, falling on the rocks of the highlands and swelling the slow falling streams. The three dragons rose over the clouds drawing energy from the sun through their photosynthetic skins. Other dragons rose through the clouds to join them and soon a vast triangle of dragons pointed roughly north like an arrowhead.

In the middle distance a range of mountains, higher than any that the dragons had yet passed over, drew closer. As the morning drew on the clouds cleared and the countryside below was revealed to be broad grassy plains. Herds of animals slowly roamed the pampas, drifting along some unknown migration route.

In twos and threes the accompanying dragons dropped down and picked off the odd beast. The Mage and the Boffin and their guide dragon swooped low over the herds, automatically working together to isolate a single animal. The Mage swooped down and caught it by the neck and shook it killing it instantly.

The three dragons ripped into the carcass and scavengers circled, some in the sky and some on the ground, hoping for some leavings. Both sorts showed their reptile heritage. The three dragons ate their fill and left the rest of the beast to the scavengers. As they took off, the squabbling started over their leavings.

They rose into the sky and the arrowhead reformed behind them. The vast number of dragons in the escort had made little difference to the immense numbers of the animals below.

Slowly the mountains drew closer and details could be seen. One rocky peak soared over the rest, a needle of rock impossible at home. The peak had broad shoulders, subordinate mountains which would have been giants elsewhere. The range petered out to the east, but large peaks could be seen trending west.

The flying wedge of dragons headed directly for the massive spire. As they drew closer, a relatively flat area could be seen at the base of the needle. Dragons could be seen landing and taking off in huge numbers like bees round a busy beehive. Their guide led them through the crush to the centre of the crowd, and they set down on the ledge close to the base of the needle. Dragons were coming and going from a hole at the bottom.

Their guide roared and the other dragons scattered. She led them into the hole and their dragon night vision cut in. The dragons coming out cowered as they made their way into the darkness. The passage opened into a large chamber, carpeted with large tree trunks. Light filtered down from somewhere a long way above. As they mounted the pile, the trees became branches and branches became twigs.

The Mage helped the Boffin over the edge of the nest. In the centre was a huge dragon, with skin as white as snow, almost glowing in the dim light. She weaved her head from side to side but let the two humans approach.

“Well, we’re here. Now what?” said the Boffin.

She wasn’t talking to the dragon, but she snorted as if in reply, and moved sideways on the nest. She had six green eggs hidden beneath her body.

The Boffin moved closer and the white dragon loomed over her. She rumbled but let the Boffin approach the eggs. They were big; the smallest was higher than the Boffin’s waist. They were all vibrating and rolling from side to side.

“Oh, I think she wants us to be midwives, dear,” said the Boffin.

The Mage cautiously approached. He laid a hand on one of the eggs. Suddenly a blow from inside the egg pierced it, fairly close to his hand, and cracks flowed through the shell.

The Mage jumped but stayed by the egg, holding it still. The dragonlet inside hit the shell again and a whole chunk fell away. The Mage carefully pulled on the cracks in the shell and almost half of it came free. He tossed it away behind him and the mother dragon flicked it out of the nest.

“Don’t touch the skin of the chicks,” he advised. “They are still as soft as silk.”

The mother dragon started making a high keening noise. The Boffin was helping another chick from its shell, and as each chick was freed it made its way to the mother dragon. Each chick shed the spike on its snout soon after breaking free.

Finally, there was only one egg left. This was rolling around, but not fracturing. Their guide dragon nudged them towards it.

“This one can’t get out. It will die if it can’t,” said the Mage.

The Boffin picked up a stick from the nest and whacked the egg which cracked all over.

“Always the physical answer,” sighed the Mage, though he conceded that he couldn’t think of anything better.

“Perfectly safe if done scientifically,” said the Boffin.

The Mage joined her in pulling the egg apart. They exposed the dragonlet in the egg. Except, it wasn’t a dragonlet, it was a human baby.

“Oh my,” said the Boffin. “That’s why we were called.”

The dragon rumbled and the Boffin picked up the baby. Then the dragon mother gently nudged the Boffin away.

“We have to take the baby away, apparently,” the Boffin said.

The Mage nodded. “Yes, so it seems.”

He laid his hand on the baby’s head. “Hmm. He has a high destiny. Maybe a king.”

“Queen, you mean,” said the Boffin.

“Oh, yes. Silly me,” said the Mage.

They climbed down from the nest and the dragon mother trumpeted. They were still enough dragon to understand that she was thanking them, and wishing them well. The Mage and the Boffin turned and did the head dipping gesture of thanks as well as they could in human form, then turned and walked back through the tunnel. Dragons scattered in all directions as they came out onto the ledge.

“How are we going to get her back?” wondered the Boffin. “We can’t carry her when we are in dragon form, and it is impossible to walk from

here. We need to get back to somewhere near where we arrived, otherwise we will be a long, long way from home when we step back.”

“I have an idea,” said the Mage. “I can shrink her to the size of a pea and then you can carry her in your crop. When we get near to the peak where we arrived, you can regurgitate her, and I’ll expand her, and we can step back. Would that work?”

“Yes, that’s a good plan. But what if she moves from my crop into my digestive system?”

“Oh, well, she wouldn’t be digested, as she would be compressed, so you’d just poop her out.”

“OK, undignified but safe. Let’s do it.”

So the Mage shrank the baby to the size of a pea and the Boffin swallowed her and stowed her in her crop. She flapped her wings. The Mage flapped his, and they tapped their snouts together then stepped over the edge of the ledge. The updraft caught them and tossed them high into the air. Their guide reappeared and led them south. Their escort of dragons formed up behind them.

The guide seemed playful and led them through narrow canyons and under overhangs, and through needle eyes in the rocks, causing their escort to split and single file and re-merge. The Boffin loved it and shrieked her joy. Even in the open the escort swirled and twisted in a loose cone centred on the guide dragon. It was an aerial symphony of joy. A murmuration of dragons.

At one point they encountered some herds of migrating beasts again, and again they stopped off and killed and ate a beast to build up their energy levels. Again the scavengers started to arrive before they had finished feasting.

As they got nearer to the point where they had stepped into this space, the escort dropped out one by one, so that eventually there were just the three of them.

They swooped down to tear up some of the tasty vegetation from another alpine meadow. The plants were reminiscent of heather, with dark berries and dark leaves, but the plants were tall and spindly, like many plants in this space of lower gravity.

Eventually, they arrived at a point where the guide dragon soared upwards and settled on a peak, just as the sun was setting to the west. Everything turned dimly pink as it was illuminated only by the halo. The brighter stars could be seen as the halo glow died down. The Boffin and the Mage settled beside their guide and the Boffin walked up to her and laid a hand on her snout.

“Thank you, my dear,” she said “for your invaluable help. I salute you.”

This was as close as she could come to expressing her feelings to the dragon while in human form. She hoped that it translated well to into dragon. The guide dragon snorted, which raised the surrounding dust. Then she raised her head and bugled.

“She says ‘Thank you, on behalf of dragon kind’,” said the Boffin. “Or something similar. It loses something in the translation.”

The Mage nodded. “The baby?”

“Oh yes. I wasn’t looking forward to this bit,” she said.

She vomited on the ground. The Mage gestured and a pearl rose into the air, and he took it into the palm of his hand. He passed the other hand over it, and was suddenly holding the baby.

“Let’s step across quickly,” he said. “Her normal bodily functions will resume shortly.”

They stepped across. Normal bodily functions were indeed resumed, which fortunately just left the Mage a little damp. He passed her over to the Boffin.

The baby started crying.

“What’s wrong with her?” said the Mage worriedly.

“We’ve had all those kids, and you still can’t speak baby,” the Boffin laughed. “She’s hungry. And a little tired, poor thing. Can you help please?”

“What? Oh, yes.”

He gently touched the Boffin’s breast, the Boffin somehow rearranged her clothing, and the baby attached herself to the Boffin’s breast. They walked slowly home, the baby feeding happily. The Mage gestured with his hand, the shimmer that surrounded the house disappeared, and the

Mage held the door open for the Boffin. Still holding the baby she relaxed into her seat with a sigh.

“Nappy,” she said and the Mage hurried to look for some. Of course there weren’t any. He checked that the Boffin wasn’t watching, and reached through a fold in time to steal a couple of nappies from when they did have babies around.

“We’ll put her in one of the boys’ cots. I think we’ve still got one around.” She knew exactly where the nappies had come from, of course.

“We’re not going to keep her, are we?” asked the Mage nervously.

The Boffin considered pretending that she wanted to, then took pity on him.

“I was thinking of Queen Charlotte.”

“Oh, yes, good idea,” said the Mage.

Queen Charlotte was unable to have babies, and the Boffin was annoyed that she was unable to help the poor woman using her medicines or even her surgery. The Mage wasn’t able to either, using his own special skills. This was the ideal solution.

King Edmund and Queen Charlotte were delighted to take the baby. So delighted that the Boffin warned them against spoiling her.

“We won’t. I may not be able to have children, but my sister Irene has four, and they’ve grown up here at the Palace and are nice kids. I’m sure she’ll help me out and let me know if she thinks that I’m doing something wrong. Coochie, coochie, coochie-coo!”

The Boffin assumed that the last bit was not directed at her.

“Charlie and Ed are both sensible people. They’ll do OK,” said Irene, “but I’m going to love being an Auntie!”

“One last thing,” said the Mage. “She’s dragon born, and her dragon nature will be suppressed for a long time, probably for sixty years or more, but will eventually come out. We don’t know what this means yet, so we will check on her often after she turns sixty.”

On the way home, with the horse clip-clopping along at a good rate, the Boffin snuggled up to the Mage.

“How long since we last had a baby, dear?”

“Well, Jimmy is fifty next year, and he’s the last.” He put his arm around her.

“Too soon to have another one, isn’t it?”

“Yes,” said the Mage, “but I couldn’t stop you if you really wanted one.”

The Boffin smiled at the way that the Mage’s answer could be understood two ways.

“Don’t worry dear. I don’t want another baby,” she said. “Yet.”

The Quest

The Sons Set Out on a Quest

The Boffin's three sons came to her one day and announced that they wanted to go on a quest.

"Fine," she said, "and could you pick up some tomatoes from the shop on your way back?"

"Mum!!!" said the oldest brother disgustedly.

"What sort of quest were you thinking of?" asked their father, the Mage.

"Oh, I don't know. Something involving brave deeds and solving riddles. That sort of thing," said the eldest.

"So nothing involving tomatoes, then," said their Dad.

"Dad!!!"

"OK, OK."

He thought for a bit. "How about you go out and find the thing that you need the most?"

"What would that be?"

"That would be part of the quest," said the Boffin.

The three brothers looked at each other. That certainly had the air of a quest.

"OK," said the youngest son. "We'll do it!"

"I have one condition," said the Mage. "You have to wear these amulets. They will allow you to call us if you find yourselves in a situation that you can't handle or where you need our help. Don't be stupidly heroic, please. Your mother has crafted them, and I have put a charm on them so that you can't lose them. To make it a real quest, we won't be able to call you. You'll have to call us. OK?"

The three sons agreed to the condition and set off down the road. They walked through the town passing the shop as they went.

"Tomatoes!" said the oldest, disgustedly.

They soon reached open country and, like all siblings, started to bicker. Eventually they reached a crossroads and couldn't agree which

way they should go, so they all started off in different directions. The youngest son went left, the oldest son went right, and, well, the middle son took the middle way.

The youngest son passed through some woods, then through a deep cutting and then through farmland. The eldest son passed through a deep cutting, then farmlands, and then some woods. The middle son passed through farmlands, then some woods and finally a deep cutting.

All three approached a cross roads and saw figures coming from two other directions. The three brothers met at the crossroads.

“Odd,” said the oldest son. “Do you think that this is Mum and Dad’s doing?”

The middle son waved his hand and a ball appeared on his palm. He studied it.

“No magic,” he said, “so far as I can tell.”

The youngest son produced a box with buttons on it. He pulled out an extending antenna and pressed a button.

“No science,” he said, scanning the area, “so far as I can tell.”

Back home the Boffin was laughing. The Mage came over to look. In her glass globe the boys were discussing the strange situation and in the end concluded that it was pure chance.

“Stop teasing them, dear. If they want to split up, let them.”

“They’re so easy to fool, and they don’t know we’re watching,” said the Boffin.

At that moment the youngest son turned away from his brothers and looked straight at the Boffin and the Mage and winked.

“Well I never,” said the Boffin.

The Mage laughed. “So much for not knowing that we are watching,” he said. “Put away the globe, dear, and let them get on with it.”

The Boffin sighed and put it away, but from time to time over the next few days she glanced longingly at the cupboard.

The boys walked down the road for a mile or two and came across another crossroad. They stopped and looked at it suspiciously. Finally, the oldest brother came to a decision.

“Luck!” he said, and the other two said the same, and they all bumped fists. Then once again the youngest son took the left-hand road, the oldest son took the right-hand road, and well, the middle son took the middle road.

The Quest of the Oldest Son

The oldest son found that he was getting hungry and tired. He was approaching a small town and decided to stay there the night. He thought of stopping off at the local Mystics chapel, but no one was around. Across the road lights had come on in the pastor’s house, but he decided not to trouble her.

He had a little money, so he pressed on into the local town. He had a meal at the small pub, and then wondered where he was going to stay.

“No rooms,” said the pub landlord. “It’s market day today, and all accommodation will be full. You could try the castle. The baron often lets people sleep in the stables. Are you on a Quest?”

The oldest son admitted that he was. He reflected that going on a quest seemed so grown up at home, but here it seemed a little silly.

“If so,” continued the landlord, “the baron is looking for someone to get rid of a dragon. It’s killed three people already and eaten two horses and some cows.”

The oldest son thought that this was a bit odd. Dragons didn’t usually hang around human space. His Mum and Dad had taken them to dragon space for a holiday a few times, and the dragons had been courteous, if a little standoffish. Dragon space had lighter gravity and many small moons. Their sun was surrounded by a pink halo, and the beaches were amazing rainbows of sands washed by the slow falling waves.

Something must be holding the dragon in human space, and he wondered what it was. No wonder the poor thing had been chomping on a few cows and horses. He wondered about the people. No doubt they had charged the dragon with raised swords to try to drive it off or something, so it was likely that the dragon killed them in self-defence.

He went up to the castle, which was a modest affair, surrounded by a wooden wall. All the doors in the wall were open, so times were peaceful, he supposed. He followed the smell of horses and the stable boy showed him a stall in which he could sleep. The stable boy gave him a bale of straw to make a bed.

“Are you here to kill the dragon?” asked the stable boy. “Have you got a sword?”

“No, I don’t have a sword. But I might see if I can get rid of the dragon for the baron.”

The stable boy snorted. “It’ll eat you up,” he said. “Anyway, come up to the house tomorrow morning and get some breakfast. Dad will be there and you can talk to him about the dragon.”

“Your Dad is the baron?” he asked the stable boy.

“Yep, we’re not like rich folks with lots of money,” the boy laughed. “I hope you’re not looking for a big reward! Because we’re broke practically all the time.”

The oldest son slept well and made his way up to the castle or house as the baron’s son had called it. He went round the back and was invited into the kitchen and the baron’s wife cooked him a big breakfast. The baron was a short cheerful looking man with wispy hair on the sides of his head.

“So you want to take on the dragon, or so my son tells me?” said the baron. “I’m a bit worried about sending you up there, to be honest. So we’ve lost a few sheep and cows, but they aren’t worth a single life. But if you insist, my son will show you the way. How much do you want?”

“How much do I want?” repeated the oldest son, confused.

“If you get rid of the dragon. We don’t have much money.”

“Oh, if I can get rid of it for you, I don’t want anything. I’ll go up today and have a look, and see what the situation is.” He didn’t mention what he knew about dragons.

The baron nodded. “That’s wise,” he said. “The others who tried just went rushing in. Fools! I couldn’t stop them.”

The baron’s son gave him directions. “I’d show you the way, but Dad needs me to do some stuff. I’ve been up there and the dragon pretty much keeps in the cave. If you are just going to have a look, it’s pretty safe.”

The oldest son thanked the baron and his son, and made his way towards a gate in the wooden wall.

“Just a minute,” someone called.

He turned around and saw the most beautiful girl he had ever seen. She looked beautiful from the top of her auburn hair which was pulled back in a ponytail, down to her muddy gumboots. He found her oval face, her freckles, her work jacket with frayed sleeves and her well-worn blue jeans deeply attractive.

“Are you going to kill the dragon?” she said angrily.

“Not if I can help it,” he said. “Dragons aren’t usually vicious, and they don’t usually stay around for long. They’re noble animals.”

“Oh.” She relaxed. “Only, she’s got eggs.”

“She? Eggs? Really? Have you been in her cave?”

“Yes, though no one will believe me. She’s got about half a dozen eggs. She showed me. And she sort of flickered.”

“Like she was there one instant and not the next?”

“Yes!” The baron’s daughter impulsively grabbed his hand. Her hands were as smooth as silk to his touch, though to be honest, they would have felt silky to him if they were rough as sandpaper. They were white as snow against his darker skin. She took her hands back.

“I’m going up there to have a look today. Do you want to come too?” he asked.

She looked over her shoulder at the house.

“Come on then,” she said, and they hurried through the gate.

“Dad won’t mind. Mum might be a bit grumpy,” she said.

“What’s your name?” he asked.

“Sian,” she replied.

“Really? So’s mine. S-H-A-U-N.” He laughed.

“Mine is spelled S-I-A-N,” she said. “If you get rid of the dragon, Dad won’t be able to pay you much. We’re not very rich, even though Dad is a baron, and we live in a ‘castle’.”

“I’m not going to ‘get rid’ of the dragon. I’m going to see what is wrong, and I’m doing it for nothing. I feel sorry for the dragon.”

“I’m glad. We’ve all got other jobs apart from the ‘estate’. Mum works in the Mayor’s office, and my brother and I work at the stables in town. I

do the books for Dad, and we manage, but we can't afford a dragon removal bounty."

They climbed into the hills behind the castle and the town. Big boulders jutted from the grass and scree slopes fanned out from high above. They rounded a huge rock and turned into a grassy valley, and the cave was before them. They crept hand in hand up to the entrance, then Shaun clicked on a torch, and they walked slowly into the darkness.

The red light of the torch showed the dragon sitting on a few sticks and twigs which were a poor excuse for a nest. She saw them and rumbled a little. She moved aside to let them see her eggs.

"How did you see them before?" asked Shaun.

She clicked on her own torch and Shaun laughed gently.

"Sorry," he said.

The dragon stirred and disappeared and then came back again several times. It was like the flickering of an old movie or television screen. She appeared to be waiting.

"I think I know what's wrong. Don't be scared, I'm just going to see where she is going. OK?"

"OK, but don't be long."

Shaun stepped through to the dragon space. He quickly swung the light around. He was in a huge cavern with a pile of branches and sticks at the bottom of it. That was more like it. The dragon popped in and popped out again. He stepped back.

Sian grabbed him and clung on.

"How did you do that? Where did you go?" she said.

She loosed her grip on him, but continued to hold his hand.

"Sorry," said Shaun. "It's just that there are other places, just like here. My Mum calls them 'spaces'. There's one where the dragons come from and that's where the mother dragon belongs. She must have stepped to here, and then had to lay her eggs here, and now she can't leave them. Poor thing. She can't carry them back. No hands."

"'Stepped'?"

"Any living thing can step between spaces, but some, like humans, don't instinctively know how to. We can carry her eggs back for her. Do

you want to try?”

“Oh, yes, but I don’t know how.”

“Hold my hands. Step forward.”

Suddenly they were in the dragon space next to the nest. Sian gasped.

“I feel different. Lighter.”

“That’s the gravity. It’s different here. Can you take us back?”

“I think so,” said Sian. “Ready, step!”

They were back with the mother dragon.

“I did it! But I don’t know how! We can help her. We can carry her eggs back for her!”

They approached the first egg. They crouched down and linked hands at the bottom of the egg and stood up.

“To me, three, two, one, step,” said Shaun.

They were next to the nest. They carefully climbed up the nest, balancing the egg between them, and carefully tipped it into the nest. The egg rolled down to the bottom of the nest.

“Hmm, that’s not so good. The next egg will crash into the first.”

They moved the first egg to one side, so that the next egg would roll past it, then they climbed down from the nest to the place where they had stepped over. Then they stepped back. The mother dragon was flickering back and forth between the dragon space and the human space.

“Next one,” said Sian. “We can do this.”

She was shaking and Shaun held her for a minute until she calmed down.

“OK,” she said. “I’m OK. Let’s do it.”

They picked up the next egg and stepped to the dragon space. They carefully climbed up to the edge of the nest and tipped the egg over. It rolled down the slope and then took a kick off a stray twig and rolled off at an angle.

“Oh no, it’s going to hit the other egg!” said Sian in horror.

The mother dragon flashed into the nest and stopped the rolling egg with her claw. She wagged her head and hissed.

“I think she’s laughing,” said Shaun, “but I’m not sure.”

Sian and Shaun returned to the human space and slowly manhandled the rest of the eggs one by one to the dragon space and into the nest. Each time, the mother dragon was there to catch the egg and guide it into a safe position. When the last egg was in place the dragon did a wriggling dance around the nest and trumpeted. It was deafening in the enclosed cave. Then she crouched down and lowered her head in front of the two humans, and finally settled down on the eggs, fussing them into place.

Shaun turned to Sian. “She’s pleased. Do you want to see a little of this space? Dragon nests are usually high up, so it should be a good view.”

They walked towards the opening of the cavern, and emerged onto a wide ledge high in a mountain range. In front of them smaller mountains marched steeply away in a way that would be impossible back in human space, down to a deep green sea. Foaming streams and creeks poured in leisurely fashion down the mountains to the broad valleys and into rivers that meandered slowly to the sea. The sun, as yellow as the human space sun, was high in the sky, surrounded by a pink halo. Ponderous clouds travelled slowly through the sky.

“It’s wonderful!” said Sian. “Oh, look, there are other dragons! Did you know it would be like this?”

He nodded. “I’ve not seen it from so high up myself, as my Mum and Dad only took us to the beaches here. There were small dragons down there, bird sized ones. We called them ‘seagulls’. We could see the big dragons flying high up between the mountains. So I had an idea that it would look like this.”

“If humans can come here, why don’t they? It’s so beautiful.”

“Not many people find it easy. Many have to practise for decades to do it even once. The first time I brought us across, I did all the work. When I asked you to take us back, I was surprised that you managed it right away. You are a special person.”

“And you and your family? Are you special people too?”

Shaun looked at her. “My Mum and Dad are very special. My brothers and I are special. Sian, I like you a lot and hope to get to know you

better, but my parents can scare people. Oh they're really nice, and I love them very much, but they are, as I said, very special, and that scares some people."

Sian slipped her arm round him. "I want to get to know you better too. I want to meet your family. Let's see if they scare me. Is it too soon to kiss?"

Shaun showed her that it wasn't too soon.

They walked back into the cave to the spot where they had stepped over. The mother dragon was asleep but opened one huge golden eye, sighed and closed it again. They stepped back together to the human space.

"We've vanquished the dragon," said Shaun ironically. "But what do we tell people?"

"You used a charm to scare it off? You burnt a chemical that it disliked and it flew off? You threw water on it and it crumbled to dust?" she joked.

"I like the chemical one. I'll use that. People like physical solutions these days."

A few days later he walked in the door at home. The Boffin was pleased to see her oldest son back from his quest.

He kissed her and said "Mum, I'm going to be working for a baron about a day west of here."

"I think I know him," said the Mage from his chair. "His 'castle' is more like a fortified house, and the 'estate' has shrunk quite a bit from what it was. A nice bloke though. He refuses to charge his tenants market rates, and has helped a few of them to buy the farms that their families have farmed for generations."

"That's the one," agreed Shaun.

"So, did you find what you needed on your quest?" asked the Boffin.

Shaun nodded. "I think so, Mum. But part of finding what you need is to realize that what you need is not fixed, and changes from time to time. I think I've found what I need at the moment, though."

The Boffin asked "Can you tell us her name, then?"

Her oldest son said "Mum!!!" and blushed furiously.

“My dear,” said the Mage reprovingly. “Don’t tease.”

“Just a lucky guess,” said the Boffin lightly.

The Middle Son Finds His Way

The middle son’s name was Drew. He didn’t much like his name as he had to keep explaining to people that it was just “Drew” and not a shortened form of “Andrew”. He walked along the road until he came to the city, and was amazed at vibrancy of it, and all the bright people who lived there.

He soon got a job, plastering up advertisements on panels and billboards all over the city, though he had to pretend to be older than his fifteen years to get it. He shared a flat with three other boys who were a bit older than him, and set about enjoying the city. He made friends, he went to shows, and visited all the good restaurants, and the bad ones. He tried drinking, but didn’t like it much and something in him prevented him from experimenting with drugs.

One day he was passing the theatre and saw a “help wanted” sign, and went in. At first, he saw no one, and then through an open door he saw a boy of about seventeen or eighteen sitting at a mirror removing make-up. The boy was wearing trousers with a thick black and white stripe, and a dark blue jacket with gold buttons.

Drew watched the boy taking off his make-up, fascinated by the process. Suddenly the boy stopped and spun round.

“What are you doing, matey, spying on me like that?”

“Sorry, there’s a notice outside about a job. I wasn’t spying. I was just interested.”

“Norm!” the boy suddenly yelled. “Norm, where are you? We have an intruder.”

An older man came into the room.

“What’s all the shouting about? Oh, hullo. What can we do for you, son?”

“He’s here for a job,” said the boy with the make-up.

The older man, Drew judged him to be thirty or more, took him into another office.

“Welcome, sit down, please. Now what attracts you to this madhouse?” said Norm. “All we can offer is backbreaking work for very little pay. What’s your name? How old are you?”

“My name’s Drew. I’m seventeen. I like the idea of working in the theatre. Is it really a madhouse?”

“Crazy, my dear Drew,” said Norm. “How old are you again? You look fifteen tops. Have you run away from somewhere?”

Drew admitted he was really fifteen. “I’ve not run away. I’m on a quest to find the thing that I need the most.”

It sounded silly immediately he said it, but Norm merely sniffed and said “Quests? Over-rated”.

“OK, Drew, the job is to help out at the theatre, pretty much doing whatever needs doing. Sweeping, tidying, finding things. We’re always losing things. Help with wardrobe, help with the stage wrangling, help with lighting. Help with make-up, help with anything. You can call yourself ‘Backstage Manager’ if you like. We’ll pay you....”

Norm mentioned an incredibly low sum of money. “Well, that doesn’t seem to have put you off,” he commented when Drew didn’t react.

“Can you start tomorrow? I don’t open the theatre up until 11 in the morning, but I’ll give you a key if you want.”

Norm waved a key in the air, then he rummaged in a drawer. After retrieving several keys and comparing them and tossing them back he found a key that matched and handed it over.

“Are you the boss, sir?” asked Drew.

Norm looked at him. “Yes, but don’t call me ‘boss’. Or ‘sir’. I own this heap of rotting timber and bricks. For my sins. Jason!”

The boy with the make-up stuck his head in the door. “What now?”

Norm sighed. “Show Drew where the brooms and things are,” he said. “Please?”

“Come on then,” said Jason, and disappeared.

He showed Drew a cupboard with a few battered brooms, mops and buckets. A stack of rat traps was tumbled at the back. Bottles of cleaning materials sat on the shelves and everything was covered with a thick layer of dust.

“It’s about time we had someone to do the tidying up,” said Jason.

He picked up a toilet plunger and fenced with an invisible enemy.

“What do I have to clean?” asked Drew.

“Everything,” said Jason over his retreating shoulder.

The next day, Drew did a survey of the theatre. From the front of house, to the auditorium to the back of the stage, to the flies high in the roof, to the dressing rooms and offices and facilities. He considered. Apart from the front of house and the auditorium, everything was messy. The only areas backstage which were relatively clear were the passages to and from the dressing rooms, and the offices, swept relatively clean by the movement of people.

He thought for a bit and consulted his mental map. He’d do the areas that took the most traffic first and expand on that. He started sweeping the main passages, taking pains over the corners which had received no care for a long time. He was about two-thirds the way through when he found a chocolate wrapper for a brand which he knew hadn’t existed for years. He was staring at it bemusedly when Norm came along.

“Oh, you’ve started. Good. I was afraid that you’d done a runner. Carry on. The cast will be arriving soon.”

“Who looks after the front of house and the auditorium?” he asked.

“A couple of old ladies who’ve done it for years. I have nightmares where one of them dies. I’d have to get someone in at market rates!”

He absent-mindedly kissed Drew on the cheek and dashed off. Drew was surprised for a minute, but discovered that Norm did this with all the males working in the theatre. There was no doubt that Norm preferred boys to girls, but the kisses didn’t seem to mean anything much. Drew decided to ignore it if it happened again, like everyone else.

The cast started to arrive. The aggressively male leading man shared a dressing room with Jason. They seemed to hate each other, but late one night Drew came across them sharing a bottle of wine quite amicably, so he wasn’t sure what was going on there.

The leading girl was an ethereal blonde who shared her room with the other main female cast member who was a brunette with strong glasses. The blonde didn’t so much walk from place to place but waft. Once she got on stage, though, she could act anything from the hero’s sweetheart

to a tough gangster's moll with ease. The brunette couldn't see without her glasses and had to be directed to the stage. The other actors helped her to move from place to place once she was on it. But she too could take any role and make it her own.

Norm was the only one who didn't share a dressing room, and that was because he used his office. On the other hand, the chorus, an assorted group of six girls who were both singers and dancers shared a dressing room the size of a cupboard and Drew got used to ignoring glimpses of various inadvertently displayed body parts.

The chorus consisted of girls of different body shapes from skinny to not so skinny. Their heights varied from tiny to willowy. They were used to performing as swans, policemen, showgirls, or even a Greek chorus. Their voices harmonized reasonably well, and they filled in odd roles such as "a maid" or "a passer-by" or even "a bear in the forest". They were the backbone of the company, and they were treated really badly. They didn't seem to mind.

When there was a performance Drew set up the properties table, and retrieved the properties when they were carried off-stage or at the end of a performance. Sometimes he had to hunt for them, as the cast tended to leave them almost anywhere.

He looked after the costume department too, washing them when they started to whiff, and mending them when they got torn. His mother would have been surprised. No, astounded! Now and then he stood in on stage if the company was short of a messenger, or a centurion, or a farmer. If the prompt boy was sick he sat in a little box under the front of the stage, with the script, feeding the lines if anyone forgot them.

He loved the life, and moved to an apartment closer to the theatre. He completely cleaned up and tidied up the theatre. His props were immaculate, over time his costumes were impressive. He started to dress like his fellows at the theatre. His clothes became brighter and more outgoing, unlike his previously more usual anonymous browns, greens and greys.

One day he was leaving the theatre early in the morning after tidying up after a performance. He locked the theatre door, and walked down the alleyway to the main road. Several lads were loitering around the entrance to the alleyway.

“There’s one,” said one of them. They were all close-cropped, while Drew had let his hair grow long. The lads all wore t-shirts, short legged blue jeans with large black boots. They were all tattooed on arms, legs and faces.

They closed in around Drew as he walked down the alleyway.

“Where do you think are you going?”

“Home. Let me through, guys.”

Someone punched him on the ear and as he turned they hit him in the mouth, splitting his lip. Someone tripped him and he fell onto his back. He was kicked in the head, and then someone kicked him in the stomach and in the back.

“Hey! What’s going on?” someone shouted.

He rolled up in a ball, and they stopped kicking him. He heard various cries and thumps as a fight went on above him. A face appeared in front of him as he lay there. One of the punks. He was bleeding from the nose. Someone pulled the punk up out of his line of sight.

“Let’s get out of here!” said someone in a panic.

Everything went quiet. Then Norm’s face appeared in front of him.

“Let’s get you back inside, chook,” he said.

Norm half carried him back inside the theatre and settled him on the couch in his office.

“I saw those guys earlier, so I hung around. Sorry I didn’t get there quick enough. Let’s get you to hospital.”

“No!” said Drew jerking upright before sinking back. He pulled his amulet from around his neck and pressed the jewel.

Instantly the Boffin appeared in the room.

“Holy ghost!” said Norm.

“Not quite,” said the Boffin. “I’ll explain later. What’s been going on here?”

She checked out her son, and ran one of her instruments up and down him.

“Hmm, mostly superficial. Kidney is bruised. You’ll be pissing blood for a day or so, but that’s all, fortunately. Mild brain contusion. It’ll fix

itself. Cut above the eyebrow. I'll stitch that. Split lip. Some bruises."

"Mum, can we go home? I'd like to see Dad. I want to come back here, but I think my quest is over."

"Sure. Want to come?" she asked Norm.

Norm nodded, and suddenly they were home, in the Boffin and the Mage's kitchen.

Norm sat down heavily on a chair.

"Wow!" he said. "I was expecting you to call a cab. How did you do that? Am I dreaming?"

"Sorry, I'll explain later, but you're going to forget all this when we take you back," said the Boffin.

Norm nodded. "That's fine by me. It's pretty scary. Who are you people?"

The Mage, who was looking a little startled himself, said "You're actually taking it really well. What's happened here?"

"Oh, I noticed some punks hanging around, so I stayed nearby. Drew came out, and they jumped him, and I wasn't quick enough to stop them. Sorry, Drew."

"S'OK, Norm" said Drew, drowsily, "How did you manage to handle them? There were, what, four of them?"

"My big secret, lovely boy. I was in the Army. Special Services. Those punks didn't stand a chance, really."

"Thanks, pal," said Drew. "Stitch me up, Mum. I need to sleep I think."

When Drew had been patched up and sent to bed, the Boffin said "We're really grateful to you, Norm, for what you did. We could have patched up pretty much any injury, but if they'd killed him..."

Norm said "No worries. I love the little so-and-so. He's like the son I can never have."

The Mage laughed and clapped him on the shoulder. He felt Norm's future.

"You know, Norm, I can see that you are lonely, but I think that there's someone out there for you, somewhere," said the Mage.

Norm laughed. “Better late than never I suppose. Do you want to take me back now? I’ll leave Drew in your capable hands for now. I hope he comes back to the theatre.”

The next day Drew woke up.

“Where’s Norm?”

“We took him back, dear. He hopes you’ll go back when you are better. What do you think?”

“Yeah, definitely, I’ll go back. I was so happy there. But I think that my quest is over. ‘What I need the most?’ It changes all the time. One minute I need friends. Then I need a job. Then I need something that I enjoy. And all the time I need family. There’s never a single thing.”

He coughed. “Ouch! Why didn’t my amulet protect me?” he wondered.

“Oh, it did. It got Norm to hang around.”

“Hmm, that’ll do as a working hypothesis,” he said thoughtfully, teasing his mother with one of her favourite sayings.

The Youngest Son meets a Gremlin

None of the Mage and the Boffin’s sons were unintelligent. In fact, they were brighter than most, but the youngest son was the brightest of the three. He’d deduced that they were being watched well before his brothers did, and what is more he’d worked out how.

When they reached the second crossroads and met up again, his scan did indeed show no science, just as his brother’s scan showed no magic. But he knew how his parents had done that too, and showed them that he knew it with a wink.

As he wasn’t a silly lad he left the Mage and Boffin’s protection stuff in place. After all, he might be in dire need of the protection at some time. He was only twelve years old, and he knew that there were plenty of things that he would not be able to handle by himself.

However, he was happy as he walked along his branch of the road. It was nice to get out by himself. He loved his brothers but sometimes felt overshadowed by them. He was passed by a few cars steaming down the road and wondered if he should thumb a lift. No, he’d do it the hard way. He continued walking.

The sun sank lower in the sky, and he thought about stopping for the night. In the end he just hopped over a hedge and picked a grassy spot away from the crops in the field. He opened a flap of his backpack and removed a silver pearl. He held it in the palm of his hand and passed the other hand over it, and he was holding a lightweight tent.

He set up the tent and then cooked his meal over a small stove that he also popped out of a silver pearl. He wondered whether his brothers had packed any camping gear, and smiled. Probably not. Though he knew that they would each cope in their own way.

He sat and watched the stars wheeling slowly in the sky until the moon came up and blotted most of them out. An owl sat in a nearby tree and regarded him curiously, then flew silently away. A hedgehog snuffled past. The youngest son popped out his sleeping bag and slept soundly in his small tent.

In the morning he cooked an oatmeal porridge. He was just halfway through eating it when he realized that he was being watched. A young girl was seated cross-legged on the other side of the stove. He'd not noticed her arrive.

"I hate oatmeal, me," she said. "Got any bacon?"

"No!" he said surprised. "Where did you come from?"

"Farm," she said gesturing over her shoulder. "I get out early, or they give me work to do."

She was smaller than him, but probably around his age, he decided. She had dark ebony skin, darker even than his own dark skin, and had curly black hair much like his. When she grinned, which was most of the time, her teeth showed bright white. She wore a t-shirt which was meant for someone much larger and which was printed with a cartoon of a stylized rodent, and jeans cut off to shorts. Her shoes were sneakers that had seen better days.

"What's your name?" she asked. "I'm Susan, but they always call me Gremlin."

She flashed him what she intended to be an evil grin.

"Hullo, Gremlin. I'm Cam. What do you do, Gremlin, when you aren't bumming breakfast off strangers."

She shrugged. “Stuff. Farm work if I can’t get away from Uncle. Cooking with Auntie if I’m lucky. School sometimes, but they are nasty to me there. Just stuff.”

“Stuff that doesn’t involve washing it seems.”

She jumped up. “You’re mean! Just like the rest of them.”

Tears streamed down her dirty face.

He jumped up too. “I’m sorry. That **was** mean of me. I apologize. I’m used to fighting with my big brothers.”

She sat down again. “OK.”

“The waterworks switched off pretty quickly.”

“Yeah, it’s a trick. I was annoyed though. On the farm we don’t have tap water and washing in the trough is pretty stink.”

“Really?”

“No, I just made that up.”

“Are you naturally annoying or is it a lifestyle choice, Gremlin?”

She grinned at him. “Come and meet my family. They’ll give you a job, even if you are a tramp.”

“A tramp? At least I shower now and then.”

“So do I. Fell in the pig sty on the way here.”

“Is that true?”

She just laughed. Cam packed up his camp, which wasn’t made easy by Gremlin who wanted to look at everything. He had to use misdirection to shrink his stuff down to pearls. He slung his backpack on and followed her to the farm.

“How’d you do that pearl thing?” she asked.

“You spotted that? Rats!”

“Can’t trick a trickster.”

“Sorry, I can’t tell you that.”

“OK. I’ll find out eventually.”

“No you won’t.”

“Yes I will,” she said confidently.

They arrived at the farm. Cam wouldn't have been surprised if Gremlin had introduced her parents, but no, he was introduced to her aunt and uncle. The farmhouse was clean and relatively tidy, and her aunt had the same dark skin and curly hair as Gremlin, while her uncle's skin was slightly paler. When her aunt saw how dirty she was, she sent Gremlin off to the shower.

"And put some decent clothes on," her aunt called after her.

"We buy her good clothes, but most of the time she insists on wearing that t-shirt and those awful shoes."

"So you want a job on the farm, do you? You're a bit young. What are you, twelve?" asked the uncle.

"That was Gremlin's idea, but yes, it's a good one. I'll do anything, well, anything I can manage. Perhaps you'd like to look at this letter from my parents, sir."

He passed over the paper, but the uncle shoved it over to his wife.

"Sorry son, I can't read. Something up here won't let me learn, the doctors said." He tapped his head. He didn't seem worried.

"Your mother has given us contact information if we need it. She says it's OK for you to travel by yourself. You're on a quest. Well I never!" said Gremlin's auntie. "We can put him in Jim's room."

Cam came to call them Uncle and Auntie just like Gremlin. Uncle and Auntie had five sons and Jim, the middle son was away at university. The farm was a moderate size and with four sons and Uncle, and with Cam's help and Gremlin's help no one was too overworked.

Gremlin's help was often worse than no help at all, though. Her main chore was the pigs and Cam was assigned to help her, most days. Mucking them out often ended with them both covered in pig poo. Or Cam drenched by the hose. He watched Gremlin closely and was fairly sure she wasn't doing it on purpose. But he wasn't certain.

Gremlin found out about the quest.

"What's that all about?" she asked. They had taken a break from the pig poo and Gremlin was about three or four metres up an oak tree. Cam was sitting at the bottom praying that she didn't slip or break a branch. There was a sudden crack.

“Oops. Good job I didn’t put my weight on that branch.”

She shinned down the tree.

“Well?”

“It was my brothers’ idea. I thought it was a bit silly actually, but it sounded fun.”

“Is it? I bet they’re rescuing princesses and becoming famous. And you’re mucking out pigs.”

“Yeah,” he said, chewing on a bit of grass. “I don’t mind. I like it. But I might be going home soon. School is starting soon. Was it true about you being bullied at school?”

“Sort of,” she said. “They teased me at first. Then they didn’t.”

She looked at a beetle crawling up a grass stem.

“Hmm?” Cam said.

“Nothing like that!” protested Gremlin, though Cam wondered what she was denying. “I think that Auntie had a word with the teacher. When Auntie ‘has a word’, things happen”.

“Gremlin, can I ask, what happened to your Mum and Dad? You don’t have to answer.”

“No, it’s all right. I don’t remember them much. I was too small. Mum was Auntie’s sister, and Dad was from a farm down the road. When Mum and Dad got married he came to live with Auntie and Uncle. Something about his parents not approving.”

“Mum had me and then caught the flu and died. Medicines didn’t help. Dad went crazy for a while, I think, but then he was getting better. I just remember him playing with me on the big carpet.”

She paused and thought.

“Then me Dad was found in the river, tangled with some roots. He’d been clearing the bank and cutting back the willows. He’d slipped and fallen in and got caught by the roots. Some people said he’d killed himself, but it didn’t make sense. Why do it that way? And there were marks on the bank. Auntie ‘had a word’ and the rumours stopped.”

Cam was silent for a bit.

“You’re wondering if the story was true,” said Gremlin. “Or if it was another of my tall stories.”

She seemed hurt. Cam looked at her.

“I don’t think it was a story. I wasn’t wondering that. I was wondering how losing my Dad and Mum would have affected me.”

Gremlin burst into tears. “Thanks for believing me,” she said. Gremlin crying for real was a lot different from Gremlin putting it on. He didn’t know what to do, so he patted her shoulder.

“I have a cry like that every once in a while,” she said. “Then I’m all right. Anyway, let’s go and see if there are conkers on the Horse Chestnut tree!”

“Wrong season,” said Cam, but she was off and running. He sighed, and got up and followed her.

That evening after the evening meal he was helping Auntie with the washing up.

“I have to go home,” he said. “It’s been a while.”

“Noooo! Not so sooon!” said Gremlin. “We’ve been having fun! You can’t go!”

She ran up and started pummelling him.

“That’s enough!” said Auntie, quite mildly. Gremlin stopped, but she was still crying.

“It’s not fair,” she said. About nothing in particular.

“In the morning?” asked Auntie.

“Yes, I think so. It will take me all day to get home, so I’d better start early.”

Gremlin rushed off crying. Cam went to follow her, but Auntie gestured for him to stay there.

“Thanks for your help, son,” said Uncle. “You’ve been a great help.”

“With the pigs?” asked Cam, puzzled. He hadn’t done an awful lot, if he thought about it.

“With Gremlin. She gets a bit bored, and if she gets bored, she gets silly, and if she gets silly, accidents sometimes happen.”

“Remember when she fell through the roof of the chicken shed?” reminisced Auntie. “Of course we should have spotted that it was going rotten. Chickens and straw and bits of roof everywhere! No eggs for two days.”

She turned to Cam. “Don’t worry, Cam. I’ll talk to her later. I’ll make you some sandwiches for your journey.”

The next morning, Cam woke up early. He went downstairs and Auntie made him breakfast.

“Gremlin’s already gone out,” said Auntie. “She’s calmed down a bit. If you go out by the pig sty she might be there.”

“Thanks Auntie. Thanks for everything,” said Cam and gave her a hug, picked up his backpack and left.

He went out by the pig sty. Gremlin wasn’t there, but the sty was as spotlessly clean as a sty could be. The pigs had been fed and were lying contentedly on the straw. He looked around a bit and then decided that he needed to get a move on. As he walked towards the road, Gremlin slid down from the roof unseen and watched him go. She sniffed. Then she sniffed again.

Cam walked along the road towards home in two minds. He had enjoyed living with Gremlin’s family. True, Gremlin was annoying and irritating, but she was also interesting and fun to be with. He was still looking forward to getting home, telling his parents about his ‘quest’, and finding out how his brothers had done. He was happy with what he had achieved, even though it didn’t amount to much, really.

He got to the point where the brothers had parted, and because his mother had been teasing them on the way out, he wasn’t sure of the way home. He pulled an instrument from his backpack and scanned all three roads and started down the one that his instrument had told him was the correct one. Then he frowned and paused. He pulled out his instrument again and looked at it. At extreme range it showed someone behind him, just behind the dry stone wall around a field.

He walked a little further down the road and the person behind him followed him behind the wall. He turned and looked back. No one. Uh-oh. He carried on at the speed that he had been travelling before, until he reached a point where there was a gate, set back a little from the road. The stone walls and the gate formed a small rectangle. He ducked into

the space and waited. Someone came crashing along on the field side, detouring further into the field to pass the gate.

“Gremlin!” he cried. “I knew it was you.” She shrieked and then swore.

“That’s not very nice,” he said. “What are you doing, following me? What about your Auntie and Uncle?”

Gremlin started sobbing as she climbed over the gate.

“You’re angry! It was such fun having you there, I wanted to come with you. I left a note for Auntie. She won’t mind.”

“Of course she’ll mind! What were you thinking?”

“Auntie and Uncle are nice and so are my cousins, but I’m the odd one out.”

“Oh, Gremlin, you’re not the odd one out! They love you. All of them.”

“What am I going to do?” she wailed. “They’re going to h-h-hate me!”

“I doubt that!” he said, giving her a hug. “Anyway, let’s carry on to our house. It’s not far. Then we can see what we can do to sort out this mess. Mum’s good at that sort of thing. Oh, Gremlin!”

“I know, I know, I’m stupid, aren’t I?”

They walked up the road towards Cam’s home, with Gremlin criticizing herself at every step. Eventually Cam stopped dead.

“Gremlin, will you stop! We’ll sort this out. What’s the worst that could happen?”

“Your Mum could throw me out. My Auntie and Uncle could throw me out. I’d not have a h-h-h-home!”

“Gremlin! Now you are being ridiculous. Firstly my Mum wouldn’t throw you out and secondly your Auntie and Uncle both love you. They’d definitely not throw you out.”

Gremlin blew her nose noisily. “I know. You are right of course. I’m silly, aren’t I? I’m behaving like I’m five or something.”

“Irritating, maybe. Annoying, maybe. But silly? No. If I know my Mum, I’m going to get blamed.”

They wandered on and eventually reached Cam's home. Cam practically had to pull Gremlin through the door.

"Mum, I'm home," he called. "And I've got a surprise."

The Boffin came in from the kitchen closely followed by the Mage. The Boffin rushed up to her son and kissed him.

"Who's this?" she asked.

"Some urchin I found on the road, Mum."

"Cam," wailed Gremlin.

"Mum, this is Gremlin. I've been working on her Uncle's farm for the last few weeks. She followed me home."

"Cam," wailed Gremlin again.

"Stop teasing her, Cam. It's not funny."

"Well, you did!" said Cam to Gremlin.

"No I didn't. Well, yes, I did."

"You're welcome here, my dear, but I sense that there's some problem. Did you run away from your Auntie and Uncle, dear?"

Gremlin gulped. "Yes, sort of. I was just following Cam."

"I can't imagine why. He's nothing to write home about."

Cam snorted.

"We had such fun. I didn't want it to stop. Am I silly?"

"No dear," said the Mage. "Just a little impetuous. Like others that I know," he said looking at the Boffin.

"Yes, well," said the Boffin, elbowing her spouse gently in the midriff, "Anyway, you're welcome, Gremlin, dear. We can sort this out."

She hugged the girl and gave her a handkerchief to blow her nose.

"Thanks," said Gremlin. "Thank you."

She hugged the Boffin back.

Later the Mage came up behind the Boffin and put his arm around her. She turned her face up for a kiss. He obliged.

"You're thinking of us, many years ago," he stated.

The Boffin listened to Cam and Gremlin bickering in the sitting room. She sighed.

“Yes. It’s been so long. And we were a lot older when we met.”

“Do you regret it?”

“No, not an instant of it.”

“Same here. Why do they remind you of us? We never argued, did we?”

“No, my love, we never have. But there’s something. Can we hand the baton on, perhaps?”

“Cam’s the ultimate Boffin, but he understands that magic has a power. Do you see her as the Mage? She’s certainly all feeling and emotion. A little raw perhaps. No control.”

“Maybe. Just maybe. Early days yet. Anyway, she’s one of yours. Definitely.”

“I wonder what it is like to grow old?” he said. “You know, we have this discussion every hundred years or so, don’t we?”

“We’ll find out some time. Maybe this time, maybe not.”

The next day the Mage and the Boffin, with Cam and Gremlin, took a trip to Gremlin’s home. Their car took only a couple of hours to complete the journey even with a stop to top up the water and to burn some more wood to build up the steam pressure.

Gremlin’s Auntie and Uncle hugged Gremlin until she was short of breath.

“You’ve given us such a fright,” said Auntie, kissing her. “What have you been up to?”

“Oh Auntie, I’m sorry. I was silly. I was having so much fun with Cam that I wanted it to carry on.”

“Silly girl!” said Auntie.

“Well,” said the Boffin, “we don’t mind having her with us for a while, if that’s OK with you. She could go to school with Cam, since she’s the same age, more or less. How about we send them back to you in the holidays?”

Auntie looked at her. "Let's take a walk, just the two of us," she suggested.

The Boffin and Auntie took a walk outside. They looked at each other.

"Don't I know you from somewhere?" asked Auntie.

The Boffin considered. Should she suggest Auntie look in the mirror? True, they had different skin colours, different hair and even different body shapes, but Auntie might have the eyes to see.

"I don't think so," said the Boffin eventually. "But I've got relatives over this way."

Auntie returned to the topic of Cam and Gremlin.

"Me and Uncle have been together since we were kids. We weren't a couple until we were fifteen, sixteen. We got married at eighteen. You think that Gremlin and Cam are the same? I've been wondering myself."

"Yes, we think that they may be. I'm almost certain. We were older when I met my husband, but we married as soon as we could, and have rarely been apart."

Auntie nodded. "OK. You have her for the term, and we'll have her back in the holidays. Send Cam too, of course. Agreed?"

"Of course. Agreed."

So Gremlin came to live with the Mage and the Boffin and Auntie and Uncle watched them all go off in the car. She said to Uncle "I'm sure I know her. I'm certain. But where....?"

One day Cam came in and saw the Mage teaching Gremlin how to compress things to a pearl.

She smirked and said "Told you so!"

Cam was both annoyed at her and pleased for her, which confused him. He went in search of his mother, and asked her why.

"How did your Quest go?" asked the Boffin.

"Quest? What's that to do with anything? What did I need the most? Well, that changes all the time, of course. There's not one single thing."

He thought a bit. "Well, I've been the youngest brother all my life. My brothers have always looked after me. Gremlin's sort of like a younger

sister to me. I'm always looking out for her. Maybe that's what I need at the moment?"

The Boffin nodded, a bit sadly. Soon her baby was going to grow up. When she touched Gremlin or Cam she could feel the bond between them so strongly that she knew that it was for life. It was a bitter-sweet sensation for her. One that she'd had many times in her life.

The End of the Quest

The three brothers were gathered round the table at home. Sian happened to be visiting, and she and Gremlin were out walking somewhere. The Mage and the Boffin had gone to the market shopping.

"I hear that you 'slew a dragon', Shaun," said Drew.

"Yeah, that's what people say. It's silly really. You've heard the real story of course?"

"Sian told us," said Cam. "She's nice."

Shaun nodded. "Yeah, I know."

He turned to his brother. "I like Gremlin. She's funny."

"I know," said Cam. "She's a great kid."

His older brothers looked at each other and Shaun raised his eyebrows. Drew nearly laughed but suppressed it.

"What about you, Drew? Got any girl friends?" said Shaun.

"One or two," said Drew. He wasn't going to give anything away. As second brother he was always looking for an advantage over his big brother.

Shaun was disappointed. "What about the Quest?" he said.

"The thing that you need the most.' That's what we were looking for, wasn't it?"

"It changes all time, doesn't it. It can be more than one thing," said Shaun. "I'd say Sian at the moment. If we stay together, as I think we will, then what? A home? A career? A family? All three? At this point I don't know. But when the time comes, I'll know, I think."

"I'd say Gremlin," said Cam.

His brothers looked at him and he blushed.

"What? She's just a pal!"

His brothers just smiled.

Drew said “At the moment, I’d say the theatre. I get so much joy out of it. I’ve not met the girl yet who means more to me than the theatre, but I think that I probably will. I’ll always love the theatre though. Does that sound silly?”

Shaun and Cam shook their heads.

“Quest over?” asked Shaun.

“Quest over,” agreed Cam and Drew.

“You know,” said Cam. “I realized when I was coming back home that we’d rarely been away from Mum and Dad before. I was pleased that I’d managed OK by myself.”

“Me too,” said Shaun. “I’m glad I was able to help out that dragon. And the baron.”

“I’m the odd one out again,” said Drew. “I had to call Mum in, and I didn’t bring back a girl, like you two lover boys.”

The Boffin had just returned home and heard the last bit.

“You all did really well,” she said. “Drew, it wasn’t your fault that you got jumped by a bunch of punks. Norm was raving about the brilliant job you were doing at the theatre.”

“Actually, guys, Dad and I were wondering when you were going to stretch your wings a little. We thought of forcing the issue, but decided to let things happen naturally, and they did. One thing though — you didn’t bring back any tomatoes.”

The Forgetting

In the beginning two titanic empires fought for control of the world, of mankind. One empire was founded on the rock of magic, while the other was founded principles of science.

The Empire of Science built large machines that crawled across the surface of the world, causing death and destruction everywhere they went. The Empire of Magic created balls of fire which scorched the earth and destroyed the large machines of the Empire of Science.

The Empire of Magic sensed an opening and attacked the factories where the machines were being made. In retaliation the Empire of Science targeted the places where the Empire of Magic was weaving its curses and its spells.

And so the conflict escalated, and the people sheltered in caves and vaults underground, while up above the factories of the Empire of Science still produced the clothes, the furniture, and the other goods that people could no longer buy.

The Empire of Magic had no audience for its plays and shows, its love potions and its medicines, its spells and its cures. The war had driven people underground, and they starved and died and lived in fear.

One day a young man named Simon climbed out of the basement, where he had been hiding and starving, and searched for food on the surface, in spite of the danger. He filled his bags with as many tins as he could and walked back to his hole in the ground. Just as he was about to duck out of sight a machine of the Empire of Science spotted the movement and a charm of the Empire of Magic also noticed him.

Both weapons hit him at the same time and knocked him sideways through all the many spaces that are a step away. He arrived rather shaken in a space where the dark was light and the light was dark. Grey shapes slithered over grey rocks and slid into and out of a grey sea. The only colour was the golden glow that surrounded him.

“THIS STOPS NOW!!!!” he shouted, and the grey shapes slithered away or dived into the grey sea.

Simon stepped back to human space and raised his hands. A pulse of gold spread out from him into the distance. All the machines stopped and

the curses and spells tumbled from the sky and rolled to a stop. The golden glow still surrounded him, and he sat on a rock and waited.

When the representatives of the Empire of Science reached him, he said “Bring me the Chief Scientist.”

When the representatives of the Empire of Magic appeared, he said “Bring me the High Wizard.”

Of course, they did not come alone. The Chief scientist brought along his most trusted aides and as much scientific equipment as they could manage. They directed their instruments at Simon and tut-tutted at the results.

“If I could just take a sample of your blood, please, sir,” said one of the medical scientists moving forward. Simon gestured and he stopped frozen to the spot.

“I said ‘THIS STOPS NOW’”, said Simon. “Chief Scientist, what do you think of Magic?”

“Stuff and nonsense, of course. Silly superstition that should be routed out!” answered the Chief Scientist and most of the other scientists nodded in agreement.

“Really? Then it would surprise you then that your gunners cross their fingers before they load their big guns. That the riflemen kiss a bullet before they load it. That many of them carry a small round pebble for luck. If you believe that Magic and superstition should be routed out, move to the left.”

Most of the delegation moved to the left, leaving only four of the younger scientists shaking in front of Simon. Simon turned to those on the left.

“Your blind bigotry has devastated the world. You are banished to a space where only Science exists. Where there is no Magic. When you get tired of a space without Magic, you merely have to express your regret and you will return to our human space.”

Simon gestured and the group of scientists on the left vanished. He gestured to the four remaining scientists to come closer.

“You are now the representatives of Science in human space. Do you have a preference for your leader?”

They looked at one another and mutually selected one of the two young ladies, one with a dark skin, dark eyes, and dark hair.

“I’d be honoured to be the representative of Science,” she said, “and I certainly am not in favour of routing out Magic. I believe that there should be a balance between the two.”

Simon put his hand on her shoulder and the golden glow momentarily expanded to include her.

“I hope that you don’t regret that decision, my dear. Please stand by me.”

He gestured. “Now you have control of your machines back. I suggest that you remove them and maybe dismantle them, but it is up to you. Please, return to your laboratories and my thanks to you.”

The High Wizard also brought a delegation.

“I demand that you release our curses and spells. We need them to defeat the evil scientists.”

“What do you think of Science, High Wizard. Is it really evil?” said Simon.

“Of course it is! It denies the reality of Magic, and strives to force all things into its abominable straight-jacket.”

“So do you measure the ingredients of your spells and potions or do you just guess? Do your junior wizards never experiment with new spells or variations of old spells?”

The High Wizard spluttered a bit.

“All those of you who think that Science is evil, please move right.”

Once again, only five nervous youngsters were left in the centre. Simon turned to the group on the right.

“You want a world where Science has been banished. Well, I banish you to a space where there is no Science. If you find that you miss Science, as I suspect you will, you merely have to say so, and you will return.”

He gestured and the delegation disappeared.

“I want you to pick a leader,” he told the remaining five. “A representative of the Magic practitioners.”

They chose a young man, whose skin was olive rather than dark. He had sparkling brown eyes.

“I’m honoured, sir,” he said.

“Please come and stand with me,” said Simon. “The rest of you, please return to your studies, and please tidy up your curses and spells. They will only cause problems if they are left lying around and people stumble on them.”

He gestured and released the curses and spells. The remaining wizards left.

Simon turned to the new leader of the Magic delegation.

“I hope that you don’t regret your elevation,” he said, and laid his hand on the young man’s shoulder. His golden glow briefly extended to include the young wizard.

“My friends, we have a big task ahead of us,” he said. “I can see some problems to come, but not the solutions. Such is life. You, sire, will be my Mage, and you, ma’am, will be my Boffin. Can we join hands, please? Interestingly you are not the first, and you will not be the last.”

They joined hands.

Simon said “The weapons that hit me gave me such power! But it was just mine to give away. You, sir, and you, ma’am, are the recipients of this charge. Do only good with it, please, for the world’s sake. Your first challenge will be soon, but I will give you a week to get to know each other, and then we will start work. Magic and Science will wax and wane in influence, but neither will ever completely dominate or disappear. Now!”

Simon’s golden aura flowed out of him and into the two young people. Simon sighed and collapsed. The new Mage just caught him as he fell.

The Mage looked at the new Boffin. “He’s just passed out. I think that he thinks that he gave us all his power, but a tiny bit remains. He’s going to be a great king, I think. He can’t escape his destiny. None of us can.”

“He’ll need our help,” said the Boffin. “What did he mean, he would give us a week to get to know each other?”

The human space faded out, and they found themselves on a beach. The sand was white with bluish swirls. The vegetation that backed the

beach was dark green with a bluish tinge. The sun was much like the human space sun and was high in the sky.

“Oh, it’s beautiful! Are we here for a week then?”

“Let’s try,” said the Mage. He stepped forward and frowned. Then he stepped forward again.

The Boffin was laughing at him. “Are you so eager to get away from me?” she asked.

The Mage realized what he’d done. “Oh, sorry, no, of course not.”

The Boffin was still laughing at him when she turned around. “Oh. Look!”

Behind them was a small cabin. The Boffin ran up and in through the open door.

“Wow! Everything we might need.”

She dashed through into one of the two bedrooms. “Oh, boy’s stuff. Yours!”

She dashed into the other. “That’s more like it. Yeah, swimming togs.”

In a few minutes, she came out of her room dressed in a bikini. The Mage gulped. She didn’t seem to notice, but dashed out of the cabin into the surf.

The Mage hurried to change and soon they were splashing about, dunking each other and having a wonderful time. Eventually they tired and headed back to the cabin. The Boffin changed into a floral dress that wrapped around her, while the Mage changed into a t-shirt and shorts.

“Hmm,” said the Boffin, fiddling with a chrome and glass box on the kitchen bench. “An automatic oven or something.”

She pulled a menu card out of it. “What do you fancy?”

They selected their meals and entered the codes for them into the oven. When it pinged they brought out their meals and sat down, only for the Mage to jump up and look in the fridge.

“Wine?”

“Yes please, something aromatic, please.”

They chatted over their meals and wine, and discovered that each was interested in the other’s field of expertise, even though officially they

were supposed to hate it. They showed each other their favourite tricks.

“Mmm,” said the Mage, “I’ve a feeling that this space was made by Simon for us, and won’t exist after we leave.”

“There are others almost as good,” said the Boffin, reaching out to hold his hand. “Have you been to dragon space?”

“No, you will have to take me there,” said the Mage.

They realized that they were holding hands, and awkwardly took them back. A brief silence ensued.

“We’ve got a big job on, back home,” said the Boffin.

“Yes, I want to do it though. Don’t you?”

“Yes, but it gives me the shivers.”

“That’s possibly the wind through the window.”

“Very funny,” she said, laughing.

The first day they walked along the beach exploring. They found rock pools and caves, they found starfish and crabs. They found blue seaweed and purple seagrass. They found a large daisy like flower that grew between the rocks high above the waterline. Seagulls patrolled the sky and probed in the sand and the rock pools.

The second day they were holding hands. They walked around the point and in the distance they saw a huge twin peaked mountain on the horizon. The bay beyond the point swept round in the direction of the mountain, the blue swirled sands inviting them to walk as far as they could. They declined and turned back to their beach. They talked and talked. They swam, they just lazed around.

The third day they kissed. They had been for swim and the Boffin had put on a wrap-around skirt. They leaned on the bar at the edge of the veranda and looked out at the blue-green sea. They both started to say something and turned to look at each other. The Mage leaned in and kissed her.

She said, “Oh!” and turned away for a second.

Then she turned back and kissed him back.

“Do you think that Simon knew something?” she said between kisses.

“I don’t know. Maybe. I don’t care. Do you?”

“No. Of course not.”

“Oh look! A humming bird.”

The big climber that wreathed their cabin had come into flower and the small birds were hovering close to them sipping nectar from the deep flowers with their long thin tongues.

“Oh they’re lovely.”

The fourth day they climbed the small hill behind the cabin. Half way up the hill they came across a clearing and rooting in the ground under a tree was a small pig. It was almost as surprised as they were and grunted and ran off away from them. They pressed on up the hill, and found that the top was a rocky outcrop, and scrambled up the last couple of metres. They sat on top of the outcrop and ate the sandwiches that they had dialled up on the ‘oven’.

“This space of Simon’s is beautiful, isn’t it.”

She squirmed around and laid her head in his lap. He stroked her hair.

“Yes,” he said. “But we could do the same.”

“Mmm, maybe. Or we could just explore others, like dragon space. That’s beautiful in other ways.”

She sat up. “What’s that down there?”

“It looks like a temple or something, covered in vegetation. It’s just behind the beach, about one hundred metres from the cabin, I’d say. Want to take a look?”

“Yeah. It should be safe. I don’t think anything here will harm us. But tomorrow?”

They lazed around the top of the hill for a bit, then strolled back down to the beach. There was no sign of the piglet, except for a few patches where it had been rooting around under the trees. A few birds with fantastic tail feathers flitted between the trees.

They swam in the ocean, diving to pick up shells from the bottom and watched the multicoloured fish that swam around their legs unafraid. They walked on the beach and spotted a bush in the vegetation above the tide line with small round succulent fruits on it and ate their fill. The Mage dropped one of the fruits and a small furry hopping creature made

a dash and claimed it in its small furry claws. It was so comical that they dropped a few more fruits, and others dashed out to retrieve the bounty.

On the fifth day they visited the temple. It wasn't a proper temple, they decided, but only a building built to look like a temple. They couldn't detect any Magic or Science in it, so they decided to enter it.

Inside it was bright, with tables and chairs, and what they decided to call the altar. The altar was covered in a lined cloth and had a lighted candlestick at each end. The Mage tried to lift one of them, but it was attached to a lever. As he pulled it the wall behind the altar rose into the roof, revealing a corridor behind it.

The Boffin ducked into the corridor and the Mage let go of the candlestick, only for the wall behind the altar to descend, cutting him off from the Boffin. He pulled on the candlestick and nothing happened. In a panic, he lifted the other candlestick, but it was just a candlestick.

He searched around for another lever or hidden switch. Nothing! Then the wall behind the altar rose once more.

"Come on," said Boffin. "I'm holding it open. It's a giant puzzle!"

He ducked through the entrance and hugged the Boffin.

"Worried were you?" she said laughingly.

"You don't know how much."

She kissed him. "I probably do. It took me a while to find the switch. Let's explore."

"Nothing is going to hurt us here in this space. I feel it," she said.

"Yes, I agree. It's designed for fun, so it's going to be safe."

"Interesting," she said. "I'm supposed to be the analytical one, but I was going by my feelings. You had a logical reason, and you are supposed to be the dealer in beliefs and dreams."

"Maybe they aren't so far apart after all. Or maybe Simon's accident brought Science and Magic closer together."

"Or maybe we are both sympathetic to the other paradigm?"

They spent the rest of the day exploring the temple, from the depths of the dungeons, to the observatory on the roof. The Boffin excelled at the logic puzzles but the Mage was as good in his field of excellence. When

there was no obvious route to follow, at an intersection of two corridors for example, the Mage led the way.

On the sixth day, their last full day, they strolled on the beach, past the temple, to a broad white and blue sandy river mouth. They let the water run over their feet and paddled their way across. On the other side was a colony of seal like creatures with crests on their heads. Seagulls flew overhead raucously searching for titbits that the seals might drop.

“Phew, they stink!” said the Boffin.

“That’s what a fish diet does for you, I suppose.”

They strolled on for a while, watching the thin legged sea birds delving in the sand at the water’s edge, and peering at small darting fish trapped in the rock pools. They carried on until they reached a deep flowing river much bigger than the one that they had crossed. Small reptiles dozed on the rocks as they absorbed the sunlight.

“Time to head back,” said the Mage. The Boffin sighed and turned back. She matched steps and held his arm. He stopped and kissed her and they moved on.

After their meal that evening, they sat together in the swing chair on the veranda.

“I love you, dear Boffin,” said the Mage.

“I love you, dear Mage. But? There was a ‘but’ there,” she replied.

The Mage sighed. “Doesn’t it seem awfully convenient to you? That we became Mage and Boffin, whatever that is, and fell in love in a couple of days?”

“Do you have any married friends? How did they meet?”

“Yes, one couple met at a bus stop when the bus was cancelled. And another couple met when they signed up for the same course.”

“What if the bus had come on time? What if they’d decided on different courses?”

“Well they wouldn’t have met, would they, and they wouldn’t have.... Oh, I see.”

“Any life event is unlikely, if you calculate the probabilities. Any event. If you prefer another way of saying it, they were destined to meet. We were destined to meet and fall in love. Everything else follows on

from that. I don't know whether things are predestined, or whether we can choose our course in life. I don't care, if I have you. Another way of looking at it would be that we were chosen because we would fall in love."

"Wise woman. Will you marry me?"

She snuggled up to him. "Yes of course. I thought that you'd never ask."

On the morning of the seventh day they had just breakfasted and had a swim. They dressed in the clothes that they had arrived in, which had turned up in their clothes cupboards clean and neatly pressed.

"I could do with one of those cupboards," said the Boffin. "Imagine! No more washing or ironing."

The Mage laughed. "Yes, me too!"

They walked out onto the veranda.

"What now," the Mage wondered.

"Look, there's a boat," said the Boffin.

It didn't appear to have a motor but was headed directly for them. In the front stood Simon.

"That's not Simon, that's an automaton," said the Mage.

The boat rammed up on the shore and the automaton Simon strode up to them.

"Time's up," it said. "Time to go back."

The idyllic space faded and was replaced by the blasted landscape where they had met Simon, but there was no sign of anyone. They headed in the direction of the centre of the town, and there were a few people about. The Mage stopped a passer-by.

"Do you know where Simon is?"

"No idea. Do you mean the King? He's at the palace, I expect." He pointed down the road.

"Hey! I can understand you. What's happened? You must know. Why can't I understand anyone else?"

"What's your name, sir?" asked the Boffin.

“Zeb,” said the passer-by. “Even my wife can’t remember it. Come think of it, I can’t remember hers.” He looked bemused.

“Sorry, Zeb. We don’t know what is going on either. Maybe the King will know.”

Zeb nodded. “Good luck to you. I hope someone can sort this out.”

The Mage and the Boffin headed down the hill. In places the recent conflicts had damaged buildings or the roadways. At the bottom, in the town centre was a large building, with a big sign outside that read “Town Hall”.

People were about, mostly arguing frustratedly with each other. Or not. Most interactions seemed to end in frustration. The Mage and the Boffin headed for the doors which had a sign “Council Chamber” on them. A large man stepped up in front of them and folded his arms.

“You can’t come in,” he said.

“Why not?” asked the Boffin.

The large man reacted with shock. “You understand me!”

The Boffin looked at the Mage. “A pattern,” she said.

“Yes, we understand you. Can we see Simon now?”

“Simon? You mean the King?” He seemed confused. “I guess so.”

The Boffin and the Mage pushed through the doors, and into the room. Simon was sitting in the Mayor’s chair, shouting at an elderly man.

“I don’t care! Just find them for me.”

The elderly man said “I don’t understand you, sir.”

“He doesn’t understand you, Simon. Don’t be angry with him,” said the Boffin.

“Boffin! Mage! Where have you been?”

“Where you sent us, a week ago, Simon.”

“I did? What’s going on? Some guys rushed up and dragged me down here and put me in this throne. Why?”

“You don’t remember? You got hit by some power, Magic and Science, that gave you huge power for a short time. You stopped the war and made us Mage and Boffin, and sent us off for a week to a paradise space. You gave us most of your power, and, it seems, you made it so

that people can talk but no one can understand anyone else. Except us, apparently,” said the Boffin.

The Boffin turned to the elderly man. “Can you please get us some tea, sir? I would love some.”

The elderly man turned to go. “They understand me, and I understand them,” he muttered and shuffled off.

“Simon, it seems that the little power you retained has made you King. This is actually the Town Hall and that is the Mayor’s chair. We can help you become King, and I suggest that we start your reign here and make this town your capital.”

Simon spread his hands. “I didn’t want to be King, but something tells me I must be. I am in your hands.”

The elderly man came back bearing a tray with the tea. “Can you tell him he’s sitting in my chair?”

“Oh, sorry, Mr Mayor. That is King Simon’s chair for now,” said the Mage.

“Thank you for the tea, Mr Mayor,” said the Boffin. “We’ll get your chair back to you as soon as possible. Could you please leave us for a while?”

The Mayor said “Sure. You guys seem to know what’s going on. No one ever tells me anything.”

He shuffled off, muttering.

“Let’s all join hands for a minute. We need as much power as we can get for this.”

So the three of them joined hands.

“Can we fix up the language?” asked the Boffin.

“It doesn’t seem so,” said the Mage. “But we can create a new one.”

“How can we distribute it? We can’t do it person by person.”

“Give it to me,” said Simon. “Then when I talk to anyone they will understand, and they will be able to speak to me in the new tongue. They will then pass it on. When everyone speaks it, it will stop being special and become mundane. Children will then learn it naturally from their parents.”

“Good idea. How long will it take, dear?” said the Boffin.

“Fifteen minutes if we all use our power.”

The Mage laid out his charms and the Boffin linked them with her equations, and Simon added a few directions and suggestions. The language started from a word, became a sentence and grew into a paragraph, then a dictionary and a thesaurus, some dialects and a smidgen of slang and a few research papers and technical books of scientific words and a grimoire of magic and superstition. This became the core of the language.

The Mage added emotion and belief, the Boffin added logic and reason, while Simon added governance and direction, as well as freedom and latitude. Since it was going to be a real language they added a few negative elements, like bigotry, envy, and regretfully they allowed in grief and pain. They had to add those, even though they didn't want to do so.

The core of the language became a silver pearl in the Mage's hand. He gave it to Simon who swallowed it. The Mage gestured and the language expanded in Simon's brain.

“I think I've got it,” Simon said. “Let's start sending it out there.”

He went to the door and opened it. The security man turned towards him and Simon said “Let it be known that I, King Simon, require that all leading politicians and business leaders attend me here at their earliest convenience. You sir, what is your name?”

“Smith, sire, your Majesty,” said the confused security man.

“You will be half of my personal security guard. You will need to get someone to take your place outside the door and you will need to appoint another security guard to be the other half of my personal security. Please go ahead and set that up.”

“What about the language, sire? No one can understand anyone else.”

“That has been resolved. Anyone you talk to will be able to understand you, and you will be able to understand them. OK?”

“Yes, sire. I'll get my friend Jones to be your other personal guard and I'll start getting that message out there.”

Smith closed the door and the Mage and the Boffin and the new King returned to the table.

“My tea is cold,” said the Boffin. With a gesture she heated it up again and took a satisfied sip.

“What little power I retained tells me that the world will be totally different from now onwards,” said Simon. “There will be no Empire of Science and no Empire of Magic, though I can see that both magic and science will still battle for dominance, just not for total domination. And you, my friends, represent those two paradigms. Is there anything that I can do for you?”

“We will be busy helping you establish your kingdom for the next few years, sire. We will not have much free time, but we can’t wait. We would like you to marry us today, sire, if you would be so kind,” said the Mage.

The Boffin nodded. The new King asked them to hold hands, then he declared that they were man and wife, and added that this was a marriage of magic and science. This is why the custom is that all marriages are declared to be between those two paradigms.

Later, in their suite at the hotel that King Simon had arranged for them, they were cuddled up on the sofa. The Mage had his arm around her, and she was leaning against him, with her feet up on the sofa.

“We’ll have to let our families know that we are married,” said the Boffin. “They will be a bit annoyed that we’ve done it without them, but I didn’t want to wait.”

The Mage nodded. “But communications have been terrible because of the war. They’ll understand.”

Just then two ghostly figures appeared in front of them, gradually solidifying until they could see that they were an old man and woman.

“Pure science,” said the Boffin looking at one of her instruments.

“And pure magic,” said the Mage.

They looked at each other, puzzled.

“Ooof, mind if we sit down?” said the old man. “We’re not as young as we used to be.”

“Who are you?” asked the Mage. “How did you do that?”

“We’re the Boffin and the Mage,” said the old woman. “Or we were. You’ve taken over the mantle now. We just had to meet you before we go.”

“You’re our predecessors?”

“Yes, and we’re ageing fast. We want to wish you luck. We have enjoyed our time in the roles.”

“Yes, we’ve not regretted a minute of it,” said the old man. “I don’t think that you will either. We tried too hard at the start, but learned that you can’t fix all the problems. Once we understood that, we managed a lot better.”

“I like that solution for the language problem,” said old lady. “Letting it spread like a virus was a good idea.”

The old man and the old woman stood up and shook hands with their successors.

“Now we can briefly go back to our old names. What were they, my dear? I’ve forgotten,” asked the old man.

“Adam and Eve, dear,” said the old woman as they faded quietly away.

Ella and the Prince

Ella was like a normal seventeen-year old teenage girl, or boy for that matter. In other words, by turns gentle and aggressive, friendly and antagonistic, loving and hating, helpful and obstructive, kind and spiteful. The hormonal storms of puberty had mostly died down, but still flared up now and then.

It hadn't helped that her mother had died when she was seven, and that her father had married a divorced woman with two sons when Ella was in the middle of changing from a child to a woman. In general Ella and her step-Mum got on well, as Ella could see that her Dad was happy again, and her new step brothers, one of whom was usually at University, weren't too unbearable, she thought.

When Ella was in a good mood, she called her step-mother 'Mum'. When she wasn't, what she called her would best be left untold. Her step-mother tried to ignore the worst of the storms.

From the description above, you might think that she was a brat, but that is far from the case. Mostly her home life was tranquil and contented, with only a few blow ups to disturb the family calm. Ella was well aware of what was going on in her body, and when she did have a flare up, she would let it die down, and then apologize and be especially nice to her step-mother for a while. Then her step-mother would talk about the problems that she'd had when her sons were going through similar hormonal storms. They would usually end up laughing hysterically.

Her step-mother on her part, loved Ella to bits. She had not been lucky enough to have a girl baby in her previous marriage, but she came from a family of girls and understood what Ella was going through and made allowances. Ella did love her step-mother, but with a bit of reserve. She sometimes felt that she was betraying her mother by loving her step-mother so much. Over time though, it seemed more and more right.

One thing, though, was almost guaranteed to cause a big fight and that was housework. Ella had a blind-spot and if she was asked to vacuum the house or dust around, or iron clothes, the chances were that she would spin up into a rage. She considered that she did more of the housework than both of the boys combined. Well, she might have had a point, if it

was true that the boys didn't ever do those jobs, but in fact, they did. But they also did the washing up or put the dishes into the machine, cleaned the shower and the toilet, cut the grass, took out the garbage and even washed the car now and then, none of which Ella was asked to do. Somehow this didn't help.

But if Ella was asked to do housework, she would explode, then she would sulk, and then she would apologize to her step-mother, then she would do it. It worried her a little that such a tiny thing could cause her such grief.

"Don't worry, dear. You'll grow out of these moods," said her step-mother, hoping that she was right.

Ella would give her a hug and do the chore, whatever it was.

It happened that Ella and her family lived not far from the Royal Summer Palace. The Royal family spent a month or so at the Summer Palace most years and the locals eagerly awaited the visits, because the local economy was boosted by the spending of the Royals and the media and others who followed them around.

There were also the parties! The Royals tended to hold gala balls and banquets but the Crown Prince held parties! Famous classical musicians were hired for the balls and banquets, but famous pop groups were hired for the Prince's parties.

Of course, you couldn't just turn up for one of the Prince's parties. There was a ballot held and on the occasion that we are interested in, all three step-siblings won a ticket. Great rejoicing! It happened that Ella's father and step-mother were going to visit some friends on the same evening and would be out too.

On the day, all the family were preparing to leave for the evening. Ella wore her favourite LBD and paired it with heeled shoes. She had her hair trimmed and swept to one side. As it was a masque party, she had a black domino mask with sequined edges. She looked amazing.

Unfortunately she had forgotten to do one of the chores that her step-mother had asked her to do.

"Right, please get changed and sweep the floors in here and in the kitchen and vacuum the lounge. I've asked you several times, and I told

you that you weren't going out until you had done it," said her step-mother.

Ella immediately had a meltdown. She screamed and shrieked and begged, but to no avail. Even her father wouldn't help her.

"Go and get changed. You are not going out tonight until it is done, and that's final," said her step-mother firmly.

Ella flew up to her bedroom and fell on her bed crying. She was going to miss the party! After a bit she calmed down and changed to her ordinary clothes, and started to do the chores. Stupid temper! She resolved to never to have a meltdown again. She conveniently ignored the fact that she'd promised herself the same thing several times before.

It didn't take her long to finish the chores and the repetitive motions were soothing. She finished and sat down. What now?

"I can still go!" she told herself. It wasn't too late! She looked at herself in the mirror. OK, she looked like a panda, but she could fix that! She quickly washed off her make-up, and reapplied it. OK, it wasn't as good as it was before, but it would do. She slipped on her LBD and her shoes. Mmm, the hair was a mess. She did her best, and the end result was still amazing. She donned the mask, and picked up her black clutch and was ready to go.

As a last touch she put on a necklace that she had been given by her mother, which had a gold chain and a green polished stone teardrop pendant. She carefully locked up the house and headed for the Summer Palace. From some distance she could make out the thumping sound of the music and as she got closer she could even make out the song that was playing. Looking forward to the party, she mounted the steps to the door.

"Excuse me, miss, can I please see your ticket?" asked one of the large men at the door.

She dipped in her clutch and then realized. Oh no, she'd left it on the table!

"I can't let you in without a ticket," stated the large man.

"I've got a ticket, but I left it at home."

The large man just shook his head. She refused to cry. She walked away from the door with her head down. She WASN'T going to CRY.

“Think she was genuine, Smith?” asked the other large man.

“Probably, Jones,” said the other. “But you know the rules.”

Ella walked down the road to the corner, then turned right. This was not the way home, of course. She circled the building. Ah, an open window! She considered. A bin! Right. She pushed the bin under the window. Somehow she scrambled up on to the bin. After a bit of thought she slipped off her shoes and held them in her mouth by the straps. Yuk! Awful taste.

She pulled the window open and pushed herself through head first, into what looked like a storeroom. At first, she was able to control her descent but suddenly she was shooting through the air. Crash! She hit the floor with a bang.

“Ooof!” she said. She slipped her shoes on just as two pages rushed in to see what was happening.

“Come on, dear, you’re out.”

They pulled her through the door into the room where the party was happening. They hurried her towards the exit, but suddenly a voice called out, “Wait! What’s happening here?”

“We have caught someone who was trying to get in without a ticket, sire,” said one of the pages.

“I’ve got a ticket! I just left it at home.”

Everyone laughed. Ella realized that the party had come to a stop.

“Come here, my dear,” said the Prince.

The pages brought her before the Prince.

“Pretty little thing,” said the Prince. “Well, am I worth it?”

He threw his arms up, and a few people sniggered.

“****!” she said quietly, so that only he could hear.

The Prince laughed, and she ran for the exit, in her heels, bumping into people on the way. She burst out of the door and flew down the steps.

The two large men watched her go.

“You left the window open, Smith.”

“So it appears, Jones.”

“She didn’t make proper use of the opportunity.”

“Poor girl. I’d better go and shut it. One’s enough for a night.”

Ella headed home, crying, expressing her opinion of the Prince and her life as she went. She stepped off the kerb and one of her heels broke off.

“Should’ve gone back and got the dratted ticket! Should’ve gone back and got the dratted ticket!”

She stopped and removed both shoes and carried them in her hand. A truck went past and the driver leant on his horn. She made a gesture at him.

She arrived home and went to her room and removed all her make-up, then changed into her pyjamas and went down and watched television.

After a while her Dad and step-Mum arrived home from their friends’ house.

“Quiet evening?” said her Dad.

“You might say that,” she answered, not exactly truthfully. “I think I’ll wait up for the boys.”

“OK, dear,” said her step-mother. “We’re going to bed.”

She leapt up and hugged her step-mother. “I l-l-love you,” she said.

Her step-mother patted her on the back. She looked over Ella’s head at Ella’s Dad questioningly. Ella’s Dad indicated that he had no idea.

Ella settled down to watch the television, although she didn’t see much of what appeared on the screen. Shortly after Council Noise Control shut down the party at one in the morning her step-brothers came home.

They walked in chatting and saw her waiting for them.

“Oh, the star turn,” said Matt, the older brother.

She wailed. “Really?”

“Sorry, Ella. Yes, everyone was talking, but don’t worry. Your mask was in place and no one, except us, guessed. Everyone was wondering who you were. We were the only ones to guess because we know you so well, and we weren’t telling.”

“Oh, thanks guys! I love you both!”

“Someone might work it out, though. There were a lot of people there that know you. Let’s hope that they don’t.”

“Who would have thought that the Prince was such a

“****?” offered Robin. “Yes, it was pretty nasty.”

“Oh no!” she said. “I’ve lost my mother’s necklace.”

“Go to bed, kid, it will be better in the morning. Maybe someone will hand it in. We’ll ask.”

Nevertheless, she spent a restless night. In the morning, another blow. The news was full of a story about a mystery interloper who had crashed the Prince’s party. The interloper had been ejected, according to the inaccurate story, before she managed to approach the Prince. A fuzzy picture was shown. Ella cringed.

Then a shock. Her necklace was shown, together with a number to call. Robin and Matt looked at her. Ella realized that there was no way out.

“Er, Dad? Can I tell you something?”

The whole sorry story came out. Her Dad and her step-mother looked at each other.

“You can call, or not,” her Dad said.

“I’ll call,” she said.

She called the number and was given an appointment.

“Can you come with me, Mum? Please?” she asked her step-mother.

They turned up at the Summer Palace and were directed to a waiting room. It was partly panelled with walnut, and the doors and furniture were walnut. The top part of the walls was painted in an eggshell blue, and the ceiling ornaments were white. The lights and the fans were brass. There were portraits on the walls, and a very big painting of a large house. They had a long time to notice the details. Someone brought them some tea and biscuits.

Eventually the Crown Prince arrived, accompanied by a young Army officer, his brother. He sat down at the table with them.

“Hullo, sorry for the wait. It’s nice to meet you again. I’m very sorry for the way I behaved last night. I should not have made fun of you in front of everyone. You were correct when you called me ... that name. What’s your name, by the way?”

Ella swallowed. “Erm, I’m Ella. Do you have my necklace, sire? It was my Mum’s.”

The Crown Prince glanced at Ella’s step-mother.

“Step-mother,” Ella’s step-mother explained.

“Well, Ella, when you made your escape, you bumped into my brother, and your necklace caught on his uniform. Yes, he has your necklace.”

The young officer said “Hullo, Ella, I’m Mark. Unfortunately the chain snapped when your necklace caught on my uniform.”

He placed it on the table.

“If you permit me, I’ll get it mended before I return it to you. I want to.”

“Thank you. I’d like that.”

The Crown Prince said “You might like to know that I was severely told off by our parents for the way I treated you. And by Mark. And by pretty much everyone else who knows me. I realized pretty much right away that I had been a ..., what you called me. I sincerely apologize to you.”

“Thank you, sire,” said Ella. “I’m sorry I caused such a commotion. If only I’d remembered my ticket.”

They chatted for a short time, until the Princes had to leave. Ella found the Crown Prince to be charming, in spite of their unfortunate first meeting, but she liked the younger Prince better. She wondered without any real expectation if he would ask her out when he returned the necklace, and she couldn’t know that Prince Mark was planning to do exactly that. The future is unknown, but in at least one possible future, she was going to attend the Crown Prince’s wedding by the side of her husband, Prince Mark. Let’s hope that future came to pass.

The Boy Who Followed the Dragons

Now and then someone spotted a dragon. It was usually flying high in the sky, but no one knew where it was going to or why. Occasionally a dragon could be seen perched on a peak, resting or attending to its wings, or feeding on a cow that it had taken.

Sometimes a sighting of a dragon would be considered good luck, and sometimes it would be considered bad luck. Not that it made any difference in the end.

Patrick, or Paddy to those few friends he had, was obsessed with dragons. He read all the dragon fan magazines and watched all the films that contained dragons. He corresponded with other dragon fanciers but was often disappointed by their lack of knowledge.

“Dragons do not have four legs!” he raged to one fan magazine. “If they had four legs and two wings, that would give them six limbs, since wings are modified limbs. They are not insects! They have two wings and two legs. Four limbs.”

Nevertheless, people kept drawing dragons with four legs and two wings and it infuriated him. But no one had ever photographed a dragon, at least in enough detail to show the number of legs. Eye witnesses without cameras described, in Paddy’s opinion, beasts which couldn’t possibly exist. Three eyes or more. Crests like antlers. Glowing eyes, and breath of fire.

He considered the reports and divided them into categories. He set aside those which to him seemed fantastic, but he didn’t reject them totally.

Then there were those reports that were made by farmers and shepherds, who described how sheep and cows were taken by dragons. In general, they described the dragons as descending on bat like wings, and snatching and carrying off cattle in their jaws.

There were the reports of dragons perching on peaks, and these almost all described the dragon in an upright posture, like a bird. There were reports from pilots who had seen them from the air, and they described them as bird-like or bat-like.

Then there were the Kings. The Kings (and sometimes Queens) retreated to The Castle, and reportedly changed into dragons, which then flew off. Paddy was troubled by this. If Kings had been changing into dragons for as long as recorded history, then dragons should be as common as sparrows, he thought. But they were rare.

It didn't fit, but he had to accept it as fact. There were even blurry photographs. The only alternative was that the Crown had been faking the transformations for centuries, and that was not possible or credible. However, the descriptions did fit with Paddy's opinion that dragons had four limbs, comprised of two legs and two wings.

Paddy's room was covered in posters of dragons, news articles about dragons and various drawings of dragons. He had books about dragons, magazines about dragons. He wrote articles for the dragon magazines, theorizing all sorts of things about them.

For his articles, he wondered about their diet, how they reproduced, and what they were doing when they were seen flying through the skies. He knew that they ate meat, since the occasional cow was reportedly stolen by a dragon, but he was unsure if they also ate vegetable matter. He assumed as did most people who were interested in dragons, that they laid eggs, as many reptiles do. Paddy didn't consider them to be reptiles, but to be a related class of creature. In this belief he was in a minority, and this often caused heated discussions in the dragon fan magazines. He was also wrong. Dragons are a class of reptile.

Two things puzzled him about dragons. The first was the relationship with humans, if any. There was the King thing, of course, but folk-tales were full of heroes slaying dragons. In most cases the question was, why? Often the dragon was supposed to be devastating the area by killing cattle, it is true, but in the modern era such dragons as took a cow or a sheep always moved on. Sometimes the storybook dragons amassed great amounts of jewellery and precious items. Paddy thought it unlikely, as what use were jewels to a dragon? So the question remained : why were humans so obsessed by dragons? Why were folk-tales full of them?

The second was how they managed to fly. A dragon would be a heavy beast, about the same weight as a man. Dragon wings would have to be huge to support their weight and the bones that formed the structure of the wings would have to be thick and solid, but that would make it

impossible for the dragon to fold them, and the muscles necessary to drive the wings would be immense.

So Paddy became something of an expert on dragons, even though he had never seen one. He searched all the scientific literature and the magical tomes for information about dragons, made deductions, compared this document with that grimoire, and in the end, found that people asked him about dragons rather than the other way round.

It was a great surprise and a shock to his father and mother when Paddy disappeared. He'd announced to them that he was "going to check out something out about dragons," and that he would be back in a couple of weeks. Since he was twenty-three, and had done this once or twice before, his parents weren't concerned, but when he had been away for a month, they started to get worried.

They employed a private investigator to try to find him. The PI found that he had travelled south to a provincial town, and then told locals that he was going on a hike to the south-west and no one had seen him since. The PI eventually found his camp, but he hadn't been there for a long time, so the PI returned Paddy's camping gear to his parents.

They employed a magical investigator next, but when he was given some of Paddy's clothes to touch he was confused and surprised.

"Are you sure that these are his clothes? Are they perhaps new and unworn? Second hand?" he asked.

"No, those are Paddy's clothes. He's definitely worn them," answered his father.

"That's strange. I can't detect him anywhere. Where did you say he was seen last?"

Paddy's father told him. The MI went to the area to check it out.

"I can see traces of whoever wore these clothes down there," he reported, "but then nothing."

"Is he dead?"

"No, I would have found traces of him, his aura would still be around for years. No one can just vanish. Except it seems, your son."

Paddy's parents hoped against hope that Paddy would suddenly return, but as time went on that hope faded. Then all of a sudden one day, after

about a year, Paddy came back.

The phone rang one day, and Paddy's mother answered it.

"This is the police. We have found your son. He's in a bit of a state. Disoriented. But he's safe."

"Oh thank, thank you. Where is he? Can we see him?"

The constable on the phone told them that he was at a place many kilometres from home and far from the place where he had disappeared.

"We'll send him home, but he will have to go to the hospital there. He's got a bad cut on his cheek, and a couple on his body. Oldish wounds, but not disfiguring. He says that he was fighting for the Queen, and goes on about flying and dragons and stuff. I think he's in shock."

Eventually Paddy returned home to them. He'd have a scar on his face for life, but it wasn't too noticeable. He decided to grow a beard and cover it. He went up to his room and looked at all his dragon posters, his notebooks, and magazines. He sighed and started to clear them out.

"I don't need them any more. It's mostly rubbish any way," he explained, and cut all ties with the dragon enthusiast communities.

So what caused this change of heart? This is what happened to Paddy when he followed the dragons.

Paddy was poring over some dragon appearance statistics, plotting them on a map using his computer. He wondered what they would look like in three dimensions on a globe. He was stunned to find that they fell in groups on circles around the globe, and that all the circles met at two points on either side of the globe. One point fell in the middle of the ocean, but the other fell on land, way down in the Southern Provinces. He called them the Dragon Poles.

He looked in the literature and found that he wasn't the first person to spot the pattern, but the dry scientific paper he read didn't make much of it.

He had to go and have a look. He HAD to. He sold one of his pieces of dragon memorabilia and bought a plane flight to the nearest centre. He told his parents, kissed them, then set off. Fortunately he was able to take

time off from his job. Little did he know that he wouldn't be back for some time.

On the flight down he naturally scanned the skies for dragons and naturally, he didn't see any. He hired a car and drove as near as he could to the Dragon Pole.

"What are your plans, sir?" asked the landlady at the bed and breakfast place that he stayed at.

"Oh, I'm going to do some hiking south-west of here," he said.

"You'll love it," said the landlady. "It's beautiful out there."

"Can I leave my car and bags here?" Paddy asked. "I'm just taking my camping gear."

"Sure, dear," said the landlady. This would be one of the last traces of Paddy that the PI would find.

Paddy set off into the wilderness. He had some maps of the area and was used to camping. It took him three days to reach the area that contained his Dragon Pole, and he set up camp there to consider his next steps. He had brought along a detector which should indicate if dragons were near and a charm which should do the same thing.

He switched on the detector and immediately it indicated dragons in the neighbourhood. Unfortunately it didn't indicate the direction, and a quick look around showed no visible dragons. He activated the charm. This time the charm indicated that yes, there were dragons nearby, and at the same time, that they were far away. Hmm, confusing.

He cooked himself a meal and pondered. Dragons around and both near and far. What on earth did that mean? He puzzled over it as he ate the meal, and hadn't come to any conclusions by the time he was preparing for bed. He damped his fire down and darkness closed in.

Something crossed in front of the moon. But it was too quick. Was it a dragon, or merely an owl or night flying bird? Somewhat grumpily he settled down for the night.

The next morning, after his breakfast he moodily looked his two instruments. The scientific one still showed dragons all around. He tried shielding the antenna with some foil to get a direction but it didn't work.

The magical instrument wasn't much better. It indicated dragons close and dragons distant. He suddenly realized that it was showing a direction! But it wasn't the usual north, south, east, or west direction. It was something else.

Without thinking, he took a step in that direction. Suddenly he was on the top of a crag which jutted out into an incredible valley, deep and forbidding, still shadowed by the surrounding peaks which would keep sun light out until the sun was high in the sky.

And the rising sun! It had a halo around it and the halo was pink. Paddy looked at it for a moment and spun around. He tried to step back, but stayed on the crag where he had arrived.

A little shocked, he looked around. He realized that he was stuck here, in this **other space**. Frantically he stepped backwards and forwards, but he didn't go anywhere.

“Oh no!” he said to himself.

He sat down on the crag and thought about his plight. He remembered that he'd been trying to find dragons when he had stepped into this space. He looked around and there they were! Not far away, and rising and falling, hovering on an updraft, and he could hear them calling to one another. They swirled in a spiral, then settled onto the rocks.

He bugled a call to them (bugled?) and saw them turn towards him. He dropped into the valley, and caught an updraft with his wings (wings?), and soared over to join them. He back-pedalled with his wings and dropped down onto a spare rock between them, his claws scraping on the rock (claws?). The other dragons made space for him but one or two rumbled at him. One small female dragon kept snapping at his feet until he hissed at her.

It's fair to say that the dragon that Paddy had become wasn't too worried about having left the human space. In fact the essential part that was Paddy shrank and was compressed into a small pearl that sat in a space just above the dragon brain. The pearl didn't sever all ties to the dragon brain that was originally a small part of Paddy's brain, and was now the major part, but it was only tenuously attached.

Paddy, as I will call the dragon that was once Paddy the human, was not immediately accepted by the rest of the dragons. A few of the older ones grumbled and muttered at him, and the less mature kept challenging

him. But then, they challenged each other all the time too. The females, all small and immature, were openly hostile to him at first, hissing and pecking at him. Dragons don't usually form groups, but Paddy had stumbled into their space at a special time.

Gradually he fitted in. Dragons only formed loose groups at these special times, which often split and reformed, so the group was used to welcoming newcomers. As they swept down the long deep valleys, to the open plains beyond to hunt, they bonded by doing acrobatic flight tricks, swooping mere millimetres from rock faces and diving through narrow gaps and holes in the rock. Shrieking, the whole group would play follow my leader through the chasms and ledges that abounded in this space.

For the gravity was weaker here, and water ran slower down hill, tumbling in seeming slow motion from rocky cliffs to deep pools, fountaining up when the slow moving streams met boulders in the river beds. And gravity did not pull so hard on the mountains, which meant that the mountains were higher and steeper than in the human space.

Out on the plains the dragons hunted the roving food beasts who ran endlessly from horizon to horizon for their whole lives. When the dragons appeared so did a flock of smaller dragons with massive muscular jaws, and ground running reptiles with similar jaws. The scavengers.

The part of Paddy that was still human would have realized that he was accepted into the group when a small female and another male similar in size to Paddy joined with him in a hunt. The small female harassed and slowed the target beast and the male turned it towards Paddy. Paddy dropped onto it and broke its neck with a single bite.

The other two dragons joined him in devouring the dead food beast. They pulled the limbs from it, stripping the sweet meat from the bones and leaving the bones themselves to the scavengers, who hung around and darted in now and then to grab a morsel or two. The dragons ripped open the body and feasted on the nutrient rich entrails, the lungs, the liver, the heart and other tasty bits. As they filled their stomachs they ate slower and slower and the scavengers became bolder and the dragons only occasionally bothered to swat them away.

Finally, they finished eating and almost together they spread their wings to catch the breeze and with a couple of flaps rose into the air.

They circled upwards barely clearing the air borne rush of the winged scavengers diving in to finish off the beast. Squabbles broke out between scavengers as they fought over the remains.

On the way back to the roost the dragons stopped off to eat the foliage of some bushes, probably for some nutrient that they could not get from the food beasts. Back at the roost, they picked a convenient rock to perch on and while they didn't sleep as such, they shut down many of their bodily processes, and went comatose. Small parasitic reptiles trying to suck their blood caused them to grumble and stir and shake during the night. Paddy caught one and chewed it ruminatively.

One morning instead of flying out to the plains the group flew down to one of the pools beneath one of this space's slow falling waterfalls. They dipped and splashed and played in the water for a while, then flew up and headed along the mountain range. Paddy the dragon was aware that dragons usually lived solitary lives, though they could often see their neighbours. Paddy the human, what there was left of him, wondered why they were congregating and where they were going.

They became aware of other groups also headed in the same direction, all breaking off their trips to chase down the food beasts once or twice a day, making the food beasts skittish and wary. Sometimes they had to travel quite a distance into the plains to find undisturbed food beasts.

A mountain came into view and Paddy the dragon knew that it was their destination. It had a tall spire of rock at the summit, much higher than would be possible on earth and the foot of the spire seemed to be surrounded by mist. As Paddy's group got closer, the mist resolved into a cloud of dragons, all milling around the ledge at the base of the spire.

The group drew closer and the dragons could be seen to be congregating in dozens of places. At the centres of the clouds were mature female dragons. They were not happy, snapping at their surrounding clouds of eager males. Immature females were being shoved aside in the melees and took up perches on ledges part way up the spire.

Mature female dragons, larger than the males, started to take off surrounded by many males. Some males dropped away and others rushed to catch up. One or two of Paddy's group of males left to join the fray, while the immature females in their group were pushed aside and took up station up on the spire with the other young females.

Paddy lost track of his group as it splintered, his former companions chasing different females. He scouted around some of the females and got pushed aside by other males. Another female took off taking another crowd of males. All was confusion, with males flying up and down, changing their minds from minute to minute.

Paddy was dragged up a few times, but circled back down again. The sky was full of female dragons each with their horde of males, and it would seem from a distance as if puffs of smoke were being emitted by the base of the spire.

Chaos still reigned but the press was reducing, with fewer females furiously fighting off the males, before taking flight. New females were coming out of the tunnel at the bottom of the spire, larger than the other females and several shades lighter. Paddy's dragon mind said "Queens", though dragon Queens were not solitary rulers, like ant or bee queens. They were just long-lived mature females with vast experience.

Each Queen carried off her cloud of suitors, and the remaining males milled around waiting. Finally, the largest female yet came out of the tunnel. She was almost pure white and her weight was at least half as much again as Paddy's. Paddy's dragon mind said "**The Queen**".

The Queen flapped her enormous wings and took off with around three hundred males following her, including Paddy. There were still around a thousand or so males left behind, either because they were sick, or they had missed their chance to take part in the contest this time.

Paddy flew up with The Queen and her escort, avoiding the males who were injured in the melee and were descending to the ledges or who didn't have the energy to continue and who fell away. He used any thermal lift that he could find and screamed with joy as he picked one that few others did and rose up near to front of the chasing pack.

There was a group of about a dozen males who were cooperating in keeping the rest at arms length. Paddy bullied his way into the group, sustaining a few scratches in the process and displacing another exhausted male.

Paddy and his fellows steadily rebuffed the other males and eventually they all dropped away. Still they rose, until The Queen's rise slowed to a stop. One of the largest males darted in and grabbed The Queen, and

they tumbled through the air, mating as they fell. The other males followed their fall.

The successful male let The Queen go, and she rose through the air again and the successful male spiralled down back to the spire from which they had started. Then The Queen's rise slowed again and Paddy tried to move in. He was beaten to it by another male. One of the other males dropped away exhausted at the same time, and the remaining males again followed The Queen and her latest suitor down as they tumbled and then flew up again.

Again Paddy tried to move in but was pushed aside by another male. He was slashed across the face for his trouble. The Queen and the new male tumbled away, and the group followed. The new male then dropped away and so did two of the remaining suitors.

By this time, Paddy was nearly exhausted. They all rose again and this time Paddy timed it right, and clasped The Queen, and they tumbled as they mated, while Paddy trumpeted his triumph. Then he let go of The Queen and tumbled exhaustedly for several hundred metres before he could halt his fall. He circled tiredly down to the spire and found a perch fairly close to the tunnel beneath the spire, nearly missing the landing from exhaustion.

Not long after Paddy landed, The Queen landed, snapping at the few remaining suitors who still followed her. She retired up her tunnel and all went quiet. Many of the males and most of the females had left. A few of the other Queens still clung to ledges on the sides of the spire, tired after their flights.

Paddy looked at the sun and saw that it was starting to descend. He flew off back along the mountain range and drank at a waterfall. He stopped at a mountain meadow and tore up vegetation displacing the small animals living in it. He then headed out onto the plains. He spotted some commotion down on the ground and dropped down to see what was going on. Yes! The remains of a food beast were being squabbled over by scavengers. He chased them off and ate as much as he could tear off, but there wasn't much left on the carcass. He cracked a few bones for the marrow, then tiredly flew back to the mountains to roost.

In the morning he had some luck when he was able to join up with a small group heading the same way as him. He and two other tired

dragons managed to bring down a food beast. It wasn't a clean kill and something in him disliked that intensely, but the meat was sweet and the blood was warm, and he began to feel better.

He stuck with the group for a while, and then the group started to break up. He headed into the mountains and found a peak that looked good. He trumpeted to see who was around, and got replies from a few places around him. It would do. Not too close to others, not too isolated.

He rested for the next night, the next day, and the next night. When day next came he was about to call and head down to the plains when two humans appeared on his peak. He snorted in surprise and annoyance.

"He's nearly forgotten that he is a human," said the female. "His last human traces would have disappeared in a few months. We were just in time."

"I'll sort it," said the male, and made a gesture.

Paddy was a human again.

"What? Ah!" he said staggering.

"We've been looking for you. We had to come back in time, and it's very exhausting," said the female, grumpily.

"Don't be hard on him, my dear," said the male. "It's not his fault."

"Ah," said Paddy, trying to remember how to talk. "I came here and I couldn't get back. I followed the dragons. Who are you?"

"I'm the Boffin, and he's the Mage."

The names didn't mean anything to him.

"I mated with The Queen," he said.

"Yes, dear, we know. That's why we are here. The Queen will lay an egg and that egg will contain your offspring. The trouble is, that offspring will be human, a little girl. In the future, we rescued her and took her back to human space. The dragons asked us to. But we had to come back for you, just in case it happened again."

"Why did... Why didn't you just go back to when I stepped over and bring me back then? Why did you let me stay here for so long?"

"Your little girl. She would have been wiped from existence if we had done that. We couldn't do it. We'll take you back with us, but it will be hard for you. You will be confused for a while, as you've been a dragon

for so long. In human space it's been a year, but here, it's been a couple of weeks. Don't talk about it too much or people will think you are crazy. You will keep your wounds, and will have scars, but they are not disfiguring. OK?"

"What are the Dragon Poles? I never did find out."

"Oh, they are the points in the two spaces that are always in sync on the dragon planet and the human planet. Think of the surfaces of the two planets as two concentric glass spheres and an axis running through the two spheres at the dragon poles. All points except the two poles can move in circles around one of the two poles, but it's like the poles are locked together."

Paddy thought about that, then shrugged. "I sort of see that, but why do the dragons move on great circles passing through those poles when they are in human space?"

The Mage looked at the Boffin.

"We don't know. We think that it is a 'shortcut' of some sort. The dragons only go to human space when they are travelling. That's a very good question."

She continued, "You know, you didn't need to travel to the Dragon Pole to step across. You could have done it anywhere. The key was to do it without thinking. That's why you found that you couldn't step back."

"But you are here to take me back."

Paddy looked around. In a human sort of way, he'd enjoyed his time here. In the dragon way, which was fading from his mind, he'd been a good dragon. Dragons felt joy over a clean kill, a swooping twisting flight through the canyons and valleys, and a successful mating. Oh and a good splash and shower under a slow falling waterfall.

"Let's go before I beg you to let me stay," he said.

The Mage and the Boffin held his hands.

"Step forward."

He did so, and found himself on a high moor, not far from a small town. He staggered under the unaccustomed gravity. He felt an urge to spread his wings. But he didn't have any.

“We’ve made it so that you will not jump off of things for a while, in case you try to fly. Try not to talk too much about being a dragon. We can’t stop you doing that. You will be confused for a while, and we’ve tried to help you with that. We’ll let you go and make yourself known to the constable in the village, now. If it is any consolation, things will turn out just fine.”

“Do I get to see my daughter?”

The Boffin looked at the Mage.

“Yes, we will be in touch. We’ve given her to a Queen to adopt.”

“Good,” said Paddy. “She is the daughter of a Queen, after all, and I don’t think that I’d be a good parent at the moment. Dragons don’t look after their offspring for long. The males are often not involved at all.”

Ten years later, the Mage and the Boffin appeared in Paddy’s apartment. He’d had received a note that they were going to “drop in”.

“Wow, when you say ‘drop in’ you really mean it,” he joked.

“How are you, Paddy?” asked the Boffin, though they actually knew, because they had followed his career.

“Fine, though I suspect you know,” said Paddy. “I should be elected mayor next year, and my wife is expecting our second baby in the spring. No wings expected,” he joked.

“Can you come with us, for a few hours?” asked the Mage. “We’d like to introduce you to your daughter from the time when you were a dragon.”

“Sure. My wife is at her mother’s for the weekend, with our daughter, so that I would be free to go with you.”

The Mage, the Boffin and Paddy held hands, and then they were outside a castle.

“Are the King and Queen expecting us?” asked Paddy. “Have you told them about, you know, how their daughter came about. They know that I am happy about them adopting her?”

“Yes, don’t worry, it’s all arranged.”

They walked through the gates of the castle without being challenged, and a page showed them into a pleasant sitting room. King Edmund and Queen Charlotte were waiting. Also in the room was a small girl.

“May I present Princess Patricia, sometimes called Princess Paddy,” said the Mage.

“Hullo, ma’am,” said Paddy to Princess Paddy.

“Hullo, Paddy,” said the Princess. “Are you really my daddy?”

Paddy looked at King Edmund and Queen Charlotte, and they nodded.

“Yes, ma’am, I am.”

They shook hands, and as they touched something passed between them. Paddy and the Princess saw the landscape of the dragon space. In the foreground a dragon stretched and flapped his wings.

“Oh,” said the Princess, “that’s pretty. I’d like to go there.”

The others in the room looked bemused.

“We got a glimpse of dragon space,” explained Paddy.

Paddy stayed for most of the afternoon, talking to the Princess, about being a Princess, dragons, and all sorts of other things. Finally, it was time to go.

“You know I have to go, Pat,” said Paddy. You couldn’t have two Paddys, and they had settled on that.

“Yes, Paddy. But can you come back and visit, please?” the Princess asked.

“Of course. I’d love too. Goodbye for now, my dear.”

He hugged the little Princess and left with the Mage and the Boffin.

“OK?” asked the Boffin.

“Yes, very OK, thanks. She’s lovely, isn’t she?”

When the Princess was older, with the permission of her adopted parents, and the approval of the Mage and the Boffin, Paddy took the Princess to the dragon space, “on holiday” as they called it, and they, as dragons, flew the valleys and canyons, hunted, killed and ate the food beasts, ripped up huge mouthfuls of tasty bushes, and splashed in the waterfalls and the pools beneath them. Dragons are solitary creatures, but they were much closer than normal dragons.

The Princess eventually married a local boy and invited Paddy to the wedding. The King gave the Princess away, but only because Paddy

deferred to him. The King had wanted him to do the task. At the reception afterwards the Princess drew Paddy aside for a minute.

“Paddy, my dear father, our trips are over.”

“I know, my dear Pat. I know. It’s been fun.”

“Oh yes! But I will get back there eventually, so the Boffin and the Mage tell me.”

Paddy knew what that meant and didn’t reply. He remained a friend of the Princess, and was close to her throughout her life. He was “sponsor father” of her children. We would say “god father”. He was at her eldest daughter’s wedding, although he was frail by then. When he died, the Princess was a mourner at his funeral.

She was over sixty when she started to eat voraciously and rapidly gain weight and slept a lot. She knew what it meant. She called the Mage and the Boffin, and they supported her and her family as much as they could. They transported her to a high tower and stood guard as she transitioned to a dragon. They watched as the new dragon flew into the heights and bugled. She got a response and followed it, stepping through to dragon space as a new immature female with a whole new life in front of her.

“That’s a happy ending,” said the Boffin.

The Mage nodded. “Yes, a satisfactory resolution, my dear. I checked her children and as far as I could tell, they are unlikely to pass over when they get older. This was a one off. Shall we go home?”

The Boffin kissed him. “Yes, dear, but we must visit dragon space again soon. It’s so beautiful.”

The Robot Life

The Boffin and the Mage were visiting the local market when they came across a tent with a sign outside it.

“I say that I am a robot. Prove that I am really a person and win five dollars. Two dollars a try’,” read the Mage. “Interesting. Shall we have a look?”

They entered the tent and sitting in front of them was what appeared to be a glum looking young man. He was slouched in a folding chair, holding a bloody cloth to his head.

“What happened here?” said the Boffin. She scanned him with one of her instruments.

“Oh, a guy came in here and tried to convince me with his fists. It’s an approach that I hadn’t anticipated, I must admit. He took the only two dollars that I’d made so far and wanted more.” He sighed.

The Mage put four dollars down on the table, and he and the Boffin sat down.

“I think that I know how this is going to go,” said the Mage. He looked at the Boffin. Logic and reason were nominally her territory, but neither of them was too worried about such matters.

“Magic is science that hasn’t been explained,” the Boffin used to say.

“And science is magic that has been explained,” the Mage would respond.

“But how do we know that the explanation is correct?” the Boffin followed up.

“Only time will tell,” concluded the Mage.

He looked at the robot. “You are a robot. You are programmed to respond exactly as a person would respond in any given situation. For example, you may appear to feel pain, but you do not, because as a robot, you are not conscious, and therefore cannot feel anything.”

He gestured at the wound on the robot’s head. “You didn’t feel that, though the person who bopped you is convinced that you did, of course. You just reacted, as you are programmed to do, just like any person who has just been bopped.”

The robot sat up. “That’s correct. You are doing my work for me. What about consciousness, though? Am I conscious? Could that not have been programmed in to me?”

“Well, yes, but that is where things get blurry, isn’t it? If you are a conscious thing, you are a person, aren’t you,” the Boffin answered.

The robot nodded. “I’ll concede that. So, to prove that I am a person, you need to prove that I am a conscious being. Do you agree?”

“Well, I could argue that I know that I am a person, a conscious being, and you seem to me to act the same way that I would in the current situation, so that persuades me that you are in fact a person. But you would counter that by saying that it is your programming that makes you act that way,” said the Boffin.

The robot nodded again and waited.

“In fact the only conscious being that I know about, that I can be certain about, is myself. Everyone else, including my husband, who I love dearly, could be just a robot, with no consciousness at all. I could be the one conscious being in the whole Universe.”

Although she didn’t believe it, the Boffin couldn’t help but shiver.

“You’ve won your money, robot,” said the Mage. “Would you care to go ‘double or quits’?”

The robot laughed. “You’re going to ask me to prove that YOU are persons and not robots, aren’t you? No deal. You’d just use the same arguments.”

“Well, robot, we are just going home. Do you have a place to stay tonight? You are welcome to our spare bed, if you wish.”

“Why thank you, sir,” said the robot. “I’d like that. Just let me take down my tent. It seems that philosophical discussions don’t bring in much money.”

“But they will provide you with a bed for the night. And a meal. And some welcome conversation.”

In the end the robot stayed the weekend with the Mage and the Boffin, and they enjoyed some deep philosophical discussions with him. Or it. On the Monday they sent him off with a full back pack and a few dollars “for the entertainment”. They gave him the addresses of few friends of

theirs who would similarly like his company and would enjoy discussing philosophical matters with him.

They followed his progress with interest. Of course, their friends reported back to them whenever the robot visited them. Eventually the robot got a job as a philosophy lecturer at the University in the Capital, and rose to the rank of professor, where his (or its) sharp brain made him (or it) famous across the whole country. He went by the name of Robert.

The robot always claimed that he was not a conscious entity and that he was merely programmed to behave like a conscious entity, and no one ever succeeded in proving otherwise. Nevertheless, be it personality or programming, he was likeable and even charming. Most of his colleagues believed that it was a mere quirk of his to claim that he was an unthinking robot, but he continued to do so.

The Boffin was convinced that he was not a robot. When they had first met, she had run her instruments over him, scanning him for his injuries, and the instruments had shown nothing but a normal human being.

“I’m sure he’s a normal human being, as conscious as you or I,” she said.

“But your instruments can’t show you everything about a person. You can’t detect consciousness for one thing.”

“Neither can your charms and spells,” the Boffin, pointed out a little grumpily.

“Oh, I agree,” the Mage said. “That’s my point. Neither Science nor Magic can show that our friend is not a robot.”

“Yes, but he is no different, so my instruments tell me, from any other human, like myself, and I know that I am a conscious being. If he was not a conscious being, there should be a difference that I think that my instrument would show.”

“My charms and spells say the same thing. He seems to be a normal human. But consciousness is related to the brain, and we can’t tell exactly what is going on in the brain. He could be telling the truth.”

“Hmm. My feeling is that he is a normal human, in spite of what he says.”

“And logically, I can’t think of a reason why he can’t be exactly what he says,” said the Mage.

She snuggled up to him. “Are we having a fight?”

He put his arm around her and kissed her. “No, never. A difference, maybe, but we have never had a fight. Not in all the millennia we have been together. Do you realize that you decided based on your feelings? That’s supposed to be my area of expertise.”

“Mmm, yes, and you decided to be undecided based on logic, which is mine.”

“There’s one thing we haven’t addressed, though,” she said. “If he is a robot, who created him and why?”

The Mage nodded. “Good point. For all our abilities, we couldn’t have done it, and it is unlikely that there is anyone more powerful than us. So, he would have had to have been born that way spontaneously. Still not impossible, but if you factor that in, it favours your view. That is, he isn’t really a robot. But I’ll still reserve judgement.”

She sighed.

“So we still disagree. I love you, my dear Mage.”

“I love you, my dear Boffin. We agree on that!”

One day the Mage and the Boffin received an invitation to visit the robot and his family, which they accepted with pleasure.

“How will we go?” asked the Boffin.

“The way everyone else does? I know we could go there in a split-second, but let’s make a holiday of it.”

So the Boffin packed some suitcases, and they got their oldest son to drive them to the railway station, and they caught the train to the Capital. They sat back and relaxed as the miles flew by. They passed fields of ripening crops, passed through towns small and large. The train took them through plains and mountains, through inhabited areas and wildernesses and through dry areas and wetlands, past lakes and across rivers. The Boffin fell asleep on the Mage’s shoulder and took a while to gather herself when their train drew into King’s Cross Station in the Capital.

The robot and his wife met them at the station and there were hugs all round.

“Have you figured it out yet? Am I a robot?” said the robot. His wife rolled her eyes behind him.

“We’ve agreed to disagree about that,” said the Mage. “My wife is convinced that you are a person, not a robot, but I’m of the opinion that one can’t tell.”

The robot and his wife drove them to their home and introduced them to their children. It was immediately obvious to the Boffin that two of them took after their father and one after their mother.

During the visit, the robot’s status as a robot was never mentioned, and the Mage had to admit that it was hard not to believe that he wasn’t a conscious being, but, so far as the Mage was concerned, the matter was undecided.

During their final meal before leaving however, the robot brought the topic up. They went briefly over the arguments yet again, then the Boffin turned to the robot’s wife.

“What do you think, my dear,” she asked.

The robot’s wife looked at the robot. “We discussed this before we got married. I fell in love with him, even though he said that ‘he’ didn’t exist, as such. If he is only reacting according to his programming, his programming is causing him to behave as if he loves me. I am not able to tell the difference, so as far as I am concerned, there is no difference. He does love me, and he isn’t a robot.”

The robot smiled and kissed his wife. He put his hand on her metal one and put his arm around her metal shoulders.

Then one of the kids, the one made of metal, said “Can we have ice cream, please?”

The Red Hoodie Gang

Constable Steve strolled slowly down the road, making his way through his little town. He had a deep knowledge of the area, and knew, pretty much, what went on behind almost every door. The casual observer would have said that his route through the town was random, but the casual observer would not have noticed that whatever route the Constable took seemed to cover all parts of the town.

“Morning Mrs Patterson,” Constable Steve said. “How’s Mr Patterson?”

“Fine, thank you, Constable,” Mrs Patterson said. “His leg is getting better day by day. He’ll soon be able to get back to work.”

Constable Steve nodded and carried on. Mr Patterson had been injured at work and his employer had initially been unwilling to keep him on. Constable Steve had a word with the employer and discussed with him his legal obligations in regard to employee safety and mentioned several checks that he, Constable Steve, could carry out, “if he had the time”.

The employer, who wasn’t a bad chap really, could take a hint, and informed Mr Patterson that his job was safe, and even delivered a food parcel to the Pattersons “to help out”. He also, as suggested by Constable Steve, made some changes to prevent such accidents happening in the future. Constable Steve had checked. He was pleased by the outcome.

He hadn’t actually had to do anything, except talk to people, and had achieved a satisfactory result. Of course, if the employer had proved to be difficult, then Constable Steve knew of various laws that could have been used to try to remedy the situation.

But Constable Steve only used the heavy hand of the law if he had no other option. He saw himself more as an advisor or peace maker, and the citizens of the town as his charges. So he smiled happily as he strolled on his way.

Then his smile disappeared, to be replaced by a frown. A small girl, maybe twelve years of age sat cross-legged in front of a shop. She wore a red hoodie and had placed a small basket in front of her and held a piece of cardboard.

“Hullo, Red. No school today?” said Constable Steve.

She started and looked left and right, but there was no escape. Anyway, Constable Steve knew where she lived. She half heartedly tried to hide the piece of cardboard and the basket.

“Spare a few coins for food for my Granny” read Constable Steve. “What about school, Red?”

“I went this morning, Constable Steve. There’s just sports this afternoon.”

“Hmm,” said Constable Steve. “I will check, you know. No sign of your Dad then?”

Red’s Dad had lost his job and had gone to the Capital to look for work. He wasn’t much of a writer, and all that Red and her Granny got was the occasional postcard that read something like “Getting on fine. Hope you are well. Love, Dad.” No address.

Red’s mother had died when she was a baby and Red and her Dad had lived with Granny ever since. Granny worked in a local shop, but had fallen ill soon after Red’s Dad had gone to the Capital, and had to give up her job. She was a lot better now, but couldn’t find another job.

Constable Steve thought of the family as one of his few failures. He’d almost arranged another job for Red’s Dad, but the man had gone off to the Capital before Constable Steve could complete the arrangements. Then Granny had fallen ill. Now that she was better, they got a little money by selling eggs from their chickens, but they were grateful for the food parcels that Constable Steve arranged. It looked like they still weren’t getting by.

“Another postcard came the other day. He’s fine. Didn’t say when he’d be home.”

“Where’s that hairy friend of yours, by the way? You’re supposed to have him on a lead in town, you know.”

Red looked around. “I don’t know. He was here a minute ago. Probably saw you coming, Constable Steve. Eric! Where are you?”

A scruffy dog crept around the corner. It didn’t look like much. It was as if the word ‘hangdog’ had been created especially for it. It was quite large, but scruffy, with a tangled coat. For all its size, it looked frightened. It cowered away from Constable Steve as if he was about to

beat it, which of course he would never do. It reluctantly lay down next to Red.

Constable Steve sighed. "It's supposed to have a collar on."

"Whoops." Red whipped around and pulled a dog collar from her backpack and fitted it round the dog's neck. She attached a lead. "Sorry, Constable Steve. I forgot."

"Move on, Red. You know you aren't supposed to beg in the street," said Constable Steve.

He bent down and picked up Red's basket. "Hmm. Anyway, you don't seem to have been doing too well."

He gave the basket back to Red, turned, started to stroll off down the road. In a convenient reflection in a shop front he saw Red and the dog headed for home. He sighed. He'd try to do something about the Red problem, but the question was what?

Red and the dog strolled towards Granny's house which was just beyond the town, a little into the woods. When they were out of the town Red took the lead and the collar off the dog and then stood still. Hands touched her backpack, but she kept looking forwards. Various grunts and mutterings went on behind her.

"I'm done," said a voice, and a small scruffy boy stepped up beside her.

She sighed. "Eric, I never want to see you change again. That once was enough."

"What about me?" said Eric. "I'm not too keen on people seeing me starkers either."

"What happened to you back there when Constable Steve caught me? You were supposed to be keeping a look out." Red asked.

Eric was embarrassed. "Uh, I was just round behind the butchers. To see what there was. Sometimes there's some choice bits, and I'm not fussy when I'm a wolf."

"Dog, Eric. Why did my best friend turn out to be a were-dog?" Red asked the universe.

"How much did we get?" asked Eric, the were-dog.

“Constable Steve slipped me a five dollar note,” she answered. “He’s so nice. But apart from that, just small change. We have to get a better plan.”

Eric kicked a stone. “But what? Hey, we could rob the bank!”

“And get slung into jail. That wouldn’t work. Banks are too well protected.”

She thought a bit. “Roads aren’t though.”

Constable Steve pondered Red’s case as he went home. He kissed his wife and played with his son before his son’s bath and bedtime, but he must have seemed preoccupied.

“Steve, have you got something on your mind? You’ve been a bit distant, dear,” said his wife, Linda.

“Sorry, dear,” he said and kissed her. He sighed.

“There’s a small girl and her Granny. Her Dad’s off looking for work in the Capital, and there’s very little money. Granny hurt her hip, and while the doctor’s pills and charms worked, and she’s getting better, she had to give up her job. I caught the girl begging in town today.”

“Oh no! Did you arrest her?”

“No, of course not. What good would that do? I just moved her and her dog on.”

He scratched his chin. “There’s something funny about that dog. I don’t know what it is.”

“Is there anything that you can do?”

Constable Steve made a decision. “Yes, there is something that I can try.”

He explained his plan to his wife.

“Yes, that might work,” she said. “Is this girl the one who always wears a red hoodie? Has a rather large scruffy dog?”

“Yes! Do you know her?”

“I always buy eggs from her Granny when I’m over there. She’s a marvellous cook. Used to win awards, apparently.”

“That’s given me another idea. You know that Lucy from down the road wants a wedding cake made? The baker is booked out, and she’s looking for someone else to make a cake for her.”

“You think Granny could make it for her? That’s a good idea,” said his wife. “I’ll go and see Lucy tomorrow. Now, can you put work aside for the rest of the evening?”

Now that he had a plan, Constable Steve was able to relax and just be Steve for the rest of the evening, which pleased his wife. She knew that Steve couldn’t help bringing the job back home sometimes. It just part of what he was. It was because he cared.

The next day Constable Steve phoned someone in his little town. After a bit of discussion he got a favourable result. Feeling pleased he phoned an old colleague in the Capital. His old pal was happy to help him out and Constable Steve headed out on his rounds whistling tunelessly. His plan was in action!

Linda put her son in his pushchair and headed down the road. Apparently Lucy hadn’t yet found someone to make her wedding cake, so the two of them headed to Granny’s house.

“Hullo,” said Granny. “Come on in. I don’t have many visitors. What can I do for you?”

“Lucy needs someone to make a wedding cake. I’ve tasted your cakes, Granny, and I know that you could do it. Someone said that you used to win awards. Did you really?” said Linda.

“Just a minute,” said Granny. She shuffled off to a drawer and brought back a folder and a photograph album.

“Here are my prize certificates,” she said. “And here are some photos of my cakes.”

The folder was stuffed with certificates. First Prize this, second prize that, for scones, cupcakes, birthday cakes, even wedding cakes, and not just for local events. Some were from regional competitions, and some were from national contests. The photo album showed pictures of Granny’s cakes interspersed with pictures of a much younger Granny receiving awards.

“...and this is the cake that I did for the Royal Wedding,” said Granny.

“What? You made a cake for the King and Queen?” said Linda.

“Well, they were Prince and Princess then, my dear, but yes, I did. Me and my team.”

“Why did you give it up?”

“Well, the usual story. I met my husband, and he was a forester from this town, so I came to live here. I was going to make cakes and sell them locally, but I became pregnant with Red’s father. Then my husband died, and I looked after Red’s father while he was small, and him and Red after her mother died. I never got back into the cake making.”

“Oh, Granny, can you please make me a cake? The baker says he can’t!” said Lucy.

“Of course dear. I’d love to. What sort of design do you want?”

Lucy and Granny got down to planning the cake. It took some time, but Granny kept their cups of tea full, and provided scones with jam and cream. Linda’s little son sat happily on Granny’s lap chewing on a biscuit.

“Mmm, delicious,” said Linda, about the scones. “Have you thought of working with the baker in town? I know he is very busy and would probably be glad of the help.”

“Do you think so, dear? I might have a word with him next time I go into town.”

It turned out that the baker was very glad to pass over some of the cake making side of the business to Granny. He was flat out making loaves, croissants, buns and rolls and other bread products, and didn’t really have much time to spend on the cakes. So every day a boy brought out bags of ingredients and an order, and Granny gave him trays of cakes she had baked the day before, and Granny and the baker shared the profits. Then Granny included a few pies and suddenly she and the baker were very, very busy.

The baker wasn’t interested in making birthday cakes and wedding cakes, so he handed all that over to Granny. Granny soon became famous in the little town for her cakes for special occasions.

Before all that came to pass, though, a couple of other things happened. First of all, Red got involved with the law once more.

One day a farmer dropped in to see Constable Steve.

“Hi, Constable Steve, I want to report a crime.” He was smiling broadly.

“What crime is that, Mr Robinson?” asked Constable Steve. He wondered about the smile.

“Well, this morning, when I was going down Forest Road, someone tried to rob me.”

“Can you describe this person, please?”

“A small girl in a red hoodie. She had a mask on, and she had a large scruffy dog with her.”

“Ah, I see. Is this an official report, or do you want me to handle this off the record?”

Mr Robinson considered. He was trying hard not to laugh. “Oh, definitely off the record. I know that Red and her Granny are having a hard time at the moment.”

“What actually happened?” asked Constable Steve.

“Well, she’d rigged up a broom so that the handle stuck out into the road. I could’ve driven round it, but I stopped to see what was going on. She popped up and said ‘Give me all your money or I’ll set the dog on you’. The dog made a noise halfway between a growl and a whine. I laughed. ‘What are you up to, Red? I’m driving my tractor. I don’t have any money on me!’. She said a word little girls shouldn’t know, then said ‘Sorry to have troubled you, Mr Robinson’ and gathered up her broom, and then she and the dog disappeared into the forest.”

Constable Steve said “Thank you for the report, Mr Robinson. I’ll be happy to deal with it off the record. I’m already working on the problems that Red and her Granny are having. Thank you for reporting it, but please don’t talk about it to anyone, at least for a while.”

Mr Robinson nodded. “I hope you manage to sort it out. Red and her Granny deserve a break. Thanks, Constable Steve.”

Constable Steve considered. Red liked to hang out in the forest, but where? “The Grove”? “The General”? “The Four Brothers”? His mind roamed over the well-known places in the nearest part of the forest. Then he remembered the Gnome’s Cave. High up, with a view over a tree filled valley. Fairly close to Granny’s house. He didn’t know why, but it seemed likely.

He hiked up the trail wondering if he had guessed right. He slowed down as he approached the cave. It wasn’t really a cave, but more of a ledge jutting out into the valley with a bit of an overhang which gave some protection from wind and rain. He heard two voices. Strange.

Red’s voice said “I should have known that it wouldn’t work. You couldn’t scare a rabbit.”

The other voice said “Do you think he’ll report us?”

“Almost certainly,” said Red gloomily.

Constable Steve stepped around the corner.

“What on earth were you thinking of, Red?” he said. “And who is this?”

Red was sitting with her back to the rock, and next to her was a scruffy young boy, about her age.

“I’m Eric,” said the boy.

“But Eric’s a dog,” said Constable Steve.

Eric morphed into a dog, and his clothes fell in a heap. He changed back and grabbed his clothes to cover himself.

“Sorry,” he said. “I didn’t mean to do that. Mind if I get dressed?”

Constable Steve and Red regarded the distant view from the rock.

“Care to explain, Red?” asked Constable Steve. He had a fair idea.

“I came up here once, and Eric was already here. He didn’t have any clothes and couldn’t talk. After I’d been talking with him for a while, he was able to talk and said he came from a place where there were no humans, and he wasn’t happy there. The other dogs bullied him, so he’d wished he was somewhere else and suddenly he was. He hadn’t meant to do it, he said.”

Eric said “It’s much better here. Other dogs are trained not to fight, mostly, and humans look after them. Red looks after me. I’m such a

coward. The only problem is that I keep switching to human. I have to concentrate to remain dog.”

“I think I might know some people who could help you, Eric. Give me a day or so. But Red, you’ve been committing highway robbery.”

“Oh, no. Mr Robinson reported me?”

“Unofficially, yes, which means that I don’t have to arrest you. Anyway, he didn’t take you seriously, so I can treat this as a prank. You are very lucky.”

“Thank you Constable Steve. I won’t do anything like this again. I promise.”

“OK, but I’ll be watching you, Red. Come on. Let’s go home.”

The three of them made their way down the trail, Eric in dog form, Red carrying his clothes in her backpack.

A couple of days later, Eric, in dog form, was sniffing his way through the forest. He smelt the trace smells of squirrels, but the traces were a few days old. The very old trace of bear. A recent deer smell. Suddenly two humans appeared in front of him. He couldn’t help but change to human.

“Hullo Eric. I’m the Boffin and this is the Mage. We’ve come to see if we can help you.”

The Boffin gestured and suddenly he was dressed.

“Oh thank you. Constable Steve said that he would ask someone. It would be great if you could help me. I hate changing backwards and forwards,” said Eric.

“Constable Steve says that you want to be fully dog. Is that right?”

“Yes, please. I’m naturally a dog, and it hurts my brain to think like a human, but I keep changing to one.”

“What do you think, dear? I can change his endocrine system so that he doesn’t change. It’ll make him a bit braver too, as a bonus,” said the Boffin.

“Yes, I can change his aura, so that he is more of a dog, and less of a human. He’s mostly like that anyway. Can you stabilize that?”

“Yes, through his pineal gland. Then you can create a charm to fix it all in place. That should do it.”

“Eric, you won’t remember Red, after this. We will take you somewhere else and give you to someone who will look after you. Is that OK? We’ll leave a note with Constable Steve, so that he can tell Red.”

Eric nodded. “It’s for the best,” he said. “Will it hurt?”

“No, not at all,” said the Boffin. “Just a pin prick.”

She put an instrument on his upper arm and tapped a few buttons.

Eric said “Ow!” and became a dog.

The Mage put a slender rod on the dog’s head and a glow slid down it and, so it seemed, into the dog.

“Mm, using instruments, dear?” queried the Boffin.

“Sometimes it’s the best way,” replied the Mage. “Anyway, you use gestures and spells some of the time. Well, that’s him fixed up. Let’s go and find Constable Steve. Come on boy,” he said to the dog.

The three stepped off down the trail and disappeared between one step and the next, going who knows where.

Constable Steve went to see Red the next day.

“Eric’s gone, Red. Some friends of mine fixed his little problem, and he is fully dog now.”

“Gone? Oh no, I didn’t get to say goodbye!”

“Sorry, Red. He wasn’t happy the way he was, but my friends say that he is OK now. He’s gone to a good home they tell me.”

Red nodded. “Thanks Constable Steve. I glad he is fine. He was a good friend. For a dog.”

A couple of days later Constable Steve dropped by Granny’s house. He had with him a tall man with broad shoulders. Red took one look and shrieked!

“Dad! You’re back!”

She ran to him, and he bent down and picked her up, as if she were still five years old. “Oh, I’ve missed you, Red!”

He kissed her and put her down, and they all sat around Granny’s table.

“Constable Steve has got me a job with a forestry firm round here. His friend in the Capital contacted me, and I decided to come home,” Red’s Dad said. “I was doing quite well in the Capital though, mostly trimming hedges and gardening. But I did a few jobs trimming peoples’ trees, cutting them down, and planting them, and that paid well. I quite liked the work and I think I’ll see if anyone needs that sort of thing done locally. But Constable Steve tells me that you didn’t get any of the money I sent back?”

“Where did you send it to?” asked Granny.

Red’s Dad produced a grubby slip of paper. “I put it in this account. Is it the right one?”

Granny looked at it. “No, that’s not mine. Wait a minute.”

She shuffled through a drawer and drew out some papers.

“It’s your wife’s old account,” she said. “I didn’t even know it was still open. Oh, son!”

“Oh, Dad!” said Red in the tone that kids use when a parent does something that they consider silly or embarrassing.

Red’s Dad looked embarrassed. “Oh dear, sorry about that. I’m not very good with that sort of thing. There should be quite a bit in there by now. I’ll go into town and sort it out tomorrow.”

Constable Steve said his goodbyes and Red showed him out.

“Thanks for getting my Dad back, Constable Steve. And thanks for helping out with Eric.”

“That’s OK, Red,” said Constable Steve. “I’m glad that it all worked out. See you around, and no robbing anyone else.”

Red laughed. “Sure, Constable Steve. I didn’t like trying to rob people. I’ll apologize to Mr Robinson when I see him next. I give you my word that this is the end of the Red Hoodie Gang.”

A Bit of a Muddle

The Mayor's wife was distressed and angry. "Where's my other baby? What have you done with her?"

The Mayor was upset because his wife was upset. "Your baby is here, my love. Our beautiful baby girl."

"The other one! Where is the other one? I want to see her now! NOW!"

"There is no other baby, my dear. Why would there be?"

"I was having twins! Two babies! I gave birth to two lovely little girls."

"N-n-no, my dear. You had one lovely little girl. You've always been going to have one baby. The doctors will tell you."

The Mayor's wife became hysterical, and tried to get out of the bed to find the missing baby. The doctor came rushing in and injected a sedative and the Mayor's wife eventually subsided into the bed.

The Mayor looked at the doctor. "What now," he said.

Meanwhile, at same time, in the same place, the Mayor's wife was distressed and angry. "What baby? Why are you trying to give me a baby? You know I can't have children. Why are you being so cruel?"

The Mayor hated to see his wife distressed. "What are you talking about, my dear? Yes, I know that we had difficulty conceiving, but we were so pleased when you did conceive at last. Don't you remember?"

"No, no, no! I just woke up here, in the hospital and you're trying to give me a baby. Is this a trick? It's so cruel of you!"

She tried to get up and attack her husband, but the doctor who was standing by stepped in and injected a sedative. She subsided onto the bed with a sigh.

"What now?" said the Mayor.

The Mage came into the Boffin's laboratory. "Dear, something's gone wrong. I don't think that it is too serious, but we should have a look."

“Yes, I know,” she said, gesturing at a board bright with red and yellow lights. “Any ideas?”

The Mage drew a square in the air and it lit up with a series of pictures which kept repeating. A woman with two babies. A woman with one baby. A woman with no babies. A woman with one baby.

“Hmm.” he said. “It should only show one picture. That’s odd.”

He waved that away, and a spinning orb appeared, with bulges that expanded and contracted rhythmically. “Well, in your terms, a probabilistic crossover.”

“And in your terms?”

“A slight tear in the fabric of the cosmos.”

“Sounds serious?”

“No, not really. The cosmos is self healing. You know that. The question is, do we try to help?”

She reminisced. “Yes, that is always the question. Remember how, when we were new to the job, we tried to fix everything?”

“Yes, there was no job description was there? Yes, I’m afraid that until we realized, we did more harm than good. The wars! The destruction. The poor people. Remember, we felt so guilty.”

“We were young. We didn’t know. A good helmsman never fights the waves. He uses them instead. And humanity does love its wars, doesn’t it? Stop one here and another one pops up over there.”

“So, this case? I think that we have a minor collision between two spaces. Two worlds, according to your young scientists. My charms say that the collision happened about twenty-five years ago, when the woman was born and the spaces have only just separated. Who is she anyway?”

The Boffin turned away and typed some queries into one of her computers. “Mmm. The wife of a Mayor in a town to the west of the Capital. Morgantown. Her name is Helen, and her husband is called Tom. She’s just given birth to twins. Or has she? It’s unclear, which is odd.”

She looked closely at her computer. She tapped a few more keys. “Same in the other space. That’s good, I think. Not too much divergence.

That Helen didn't have any babies. Or did she? Again, it's unclear. I think I know what has happened, and how we can help. How do we insert ourselves? I can be a doctor, and you?"

"A doctor too. A psychologist."

She nodded. "OK. That will do fine. So in one space, or alternate world as the youngsters annoyingly refer to it these days, a woman gives birth to twins. In another space, the woman doesn't give birth. I think she might be infertile, but I'll check when we go in there. There's a crossover, and both women end up with one baby, and realize that something has gone wrong, but don't know what. Because of the crossover, no one else realizes what has happened."

"Yeah, I agree with your analysis, my dear. It agrees with my feelings."

She put her arms around him. "I agree with your feelings. I trust them, dear Mage."

He kissed her. "As I trust your analyses, my dear Boffin."

So the Boffin and the Mage visited one of the spaces, which were so close to one another that the Mage felt itchy thinking about it. The Boffin posed to the hospital doctors as an expert in multiple births, so they deferred to her. She, of course, brought along her colleague, the Mage, who was an expert in the psychology of mothers who had given birth to more than one baby.

They kicked out all the other doctors and the Mayor himself and interviewed the Mayor's wife alone.

"What's your name, dear, for the record?" said the Boffin.

"Helen," said the Mayor's wife.

"So, please describe what happened, starting from when you found that you were pregnant."

"Oh, we were so pleased, Tom and I. Then we found out that we were having twins. It was a shock and a joy. I had terrible morning sickness, but we were so happy."

The Boffin made a note.

"And then?"

“You’ve seen the medical notes?”

The Boffin nodded. The notes had no mention of twins. They were pretty normal for a single first pregnancy.

“So, when you had the babies? What happened then?”

“Well, I had the babies. Twin girls. And then I passed out or went to sleep. When I woke up people said that there was only one baby! But I know that I had two. Who wouldn’t know? I had two!”

She was getting wound up.

“We’ll get to the bottom of this,” said the Mage, “but tell me something. This is a hard question, and just to gauge your state of mind. I won’t blame you if you get angry with me. All things being equal, would you have preferred one baby or twins? I know that you will love them both, but deep down, what are your feelings?”

“I don’t know,” wailed Helen. The Boffin held her hand which seemed to calm her down.

“I guess,” sniffed Helen, “that I sort of feel guilty about having two. After all, so many women can’t even have one. And it is going to be hard.”

She paused. “Am I delusional? Everyone acts as if I am! They all say that I only had one baby, and I can’t think why they would do that. Am I going mad?”

“No dear, you aren’t going mad. We’ll sort this out. In the meantime, look after your baby, the one that you have with you. We’ll look into the other one. We know where she is, and we’ll explain everything to you a bit later. This is a very rare happening.”

The Mage gestured and installed a temporary memory. It would eventually fade away but for the moment Helen would remember only one birth. It would calm her for the moment.

The Mage and the Boffin left her room. The Mage looked at the Boffin.

“A sad case,” he said.

“Yes, but we can resolve it. The other one?”

“Yes, the other one.”

The Mage and the Boffin stepped. It was the same hospital, although the colour scheme was slightly different. In this space the Mage took the lead as the psychologist. Once again, they interviewed the Mayor's wife alone.

"What's your name, dear?" asked the Boffin.

"Helen," answered the Mayor's wife.

"Can you tell me what happened?" asked the Mage. "Start from when you woke up."

"Well, I was in this hospital, and they told me that I had just had a baby! But I couldn't have!"

"Why not?"

"Well, I was told when I was quite young that I couldn't have any babies! I had had some problems, and they had done tests, and they told me. No babies."

She started to cry, and the Boffin held her hand.

The Mage looked at the Boffin, and she shook her head. She had scanned Helen and found that she was unable to have babies.

"You'd like to have babies, though?" asked the Mage.

"Oh, yes," said Helen. She sighed.

"Why did you reject the baby, then?"

"She wasn't mine! She couldn't have been. But she was so sweet."

"OK, but she needed a mother, didn't she?"

"Yes, I suppose. I could look after her. Until her mother is found, I suppose. Her poor mother! She must be desperate."

The Mage looked at the Boffin again. She nodded.

"Look, we'll sort this out. But the baby needs looking after. Will you do that for now?"

"Oh yes, of course."

The Boffin held her hand and gestured. Then they left.

"Another false memory," said the Mage. "We need to sort this out before they fade."

“We can do it, my love. By the way, I also fixed it so that she could feed the baby.”

“We can definitely do it. I just hope that there are no side effects.”

The Mage and the Boffin set up a space. It was only a temporary space, and looked much like a boardroom, with a long table and chairs. There was a small side room with a small table and four chairs.

They called up the Mayor and his wife, the one who had given birth to twins, into the boardroom. The couple looked around in surprise.

“Where are we?” said Tom. “What happened?”

“Welcome, my dears,” said the Boffin. “Please remain calm. You are going to have a few shocks in the next hour or so. The first is that you are going to meet two people who are identical to you. They look the same as you, they have the same names, are the same age as you. I will explain later.”

Tom was a Mayor, and used to getting answers. “What’s going on? Who are you, and where are we? How did we get here?”

“Please don’t be angry. We will get you back as soon as possible. We are trying to help you and we need to sort something out.”

“I’m not staying here!” said Tom and headed for the door. “Come on dear, we are going!”

He threw open the door, and instead of a hospital corridor, he saw fields of orange grass blowing in the wind, a blue sky, and beasts like a cross between a horse and a pig, snorting and snuffling through the grass.

He stumbled back to a seat. “Who ARE you people?” he asked.

“We will explain everything shortly. In the meantime...” The Boffin gestured and two cots appeared with two babies.

“Now, Tom, what do you remember about these babies?”

“Well, Helen gave birth to them and... That’s funny. I remember that she had them both, and I also remember that she only had the one.”

“That’s what we are trying to sort out,” said the Mage. “Please look after them. There are baby things in the cupboard, and also coffee, tea, and other refreshments. We will be back in a minute.”

He opened the door, and instead of the fields of grass, there was a small side room with a table and chairs. He and the Boffin went into the room and shut the door behind them.

“What do we do?” asked Tom.

“What do we do? Why we look after the babies, of course,” replied Helen.

The Mage and the Boffin called up the other Helen and the other Tom. They went through much the same with them as with the first Helen and Tom. This Tom remembered that his Helen could not conceive, and also that she had given birth to a baby. They were as confused and as worried as the first couple.

The Boffin ushered the second couple into the larger room. In spite of the warnings, both couples were shocked to meet their counterparts.

“Please help yourselves to any drinks and food that you might want, in the cupboards at the end,” said the Boffin to the second couple. “There’s also nappies and other baby stuff in there. Just make yourselves at home, while we make some arrangements.”

She and the Mage went through the door into the side room.

“...while we make some arrangements? Is that the best you could do?” asked the Mage.

The Boffin pretended to be annoyed. “Huh! Could you do any better? Anyway get your spy glass out. Let’s see if they are getting along.”

The Mage took a small pearl and passed his hand over it, and suddenly he was holding a glass globe. In the globe the two mayors could be seen sitting in two of the seats, chatting. Their wives were up by the cots, each holding a baby, and also chatting.

“My, that was quick. Still, one either likes oneself or one hates oneself, and they aren’t haters. Shall we go back?” said the Boffin.

They returned to the conference room and both couples turned to look at them.

“Please sit down, everyone and I’ll explain everything,” said the Mage.

“OK, we have here two Helens and two Toms and two little girls. How can this be? Well I could get all technical with you, but basically you belong to two different places. We call them spaces, but today’s young scientists call them alternate worlds. In one space Helen gave birth to twins, and in the other, well, Helen was unable to have babies. I’m going to refer to Helen who had twins as Helen-two and Helen who had none as Helen-none.”

“These two spaces are so similar that each has a Helen and each has a Tom. Many, many other things are the same too. This is because the two spaces were once one space, and they split round about the moment that you were born, Helen.”

Both Helens nodded. Helen-none said “I think I understand. I sort of understand. We were once the same person, but we split?”

The Mage nodded.

“Technically, there was a probabilistic crossover when you had the babies, Helen-two, or in other words there was a small tear in the fabric of the cosmos. One of the babies crossed over from Helen-two’s space to Helen-none’s space. The fabric of the cosmos is self repairing, and little tears happen now and then, as a matter of course. As the tear started to repair itself everything changed so that it appeared that both Helens had given birth to a single baby.”

Tom-two said “Are you saying that my wife did give birth to twins? I remember it now! But why did I think that she had only given birth to one baby?”

“Because you are in a special space, a place we made, and not your usual spaces,” said the Mage. “In your usual spaces the only people who remembered what actually happened were the two Helens. A woman knows if she has given birth to twins or not.”

“Who are you? Are you aliens? Time travellers? What are you?” asked one of the Toms.

The Boffin laughed. “No, we’re human. As human as you are. We’ve got some powers that you don’t have, which we never asked for, and which we try not to use if we can help it. But we decided to help you guys out, or at least support you in your decision.”

“So, what are the options, ma’am?” said one of the Toms.

“Just call me ‘Boffin’. He’s ‘Mage’. Well, there are two options. One is that both babies go back with Helen-two. As things stand, she gave birth to them, and so they both belong to her.”

One of the Helens put her hand to her mouth. The other leaned across and put her hand on the other’s shoulder.

“The second option is that one baby goes back with each Helen. Of course, because of the tear, the Helens will remember what actually happened, but we can fix that. We can give you temporary memories, and as the tear mends, these memories will become real. Oh, and whatever you decide, you will forget what happened here. You might dream about it, though.”

“We’ll leave you now and let you discuss the options. Just press the big red button when you are ready.”

The Boffin gestured and a big red button appeared in the middle of the table. They withdrew into the side room.

“A big red button? You’re enjoying yourself, aren’t you?” said the Mage.

“Is there anything that says I can’t enjoy it?” said the Boffin. “I think that we’ll have a good outcome. The Helens are your people, feeling and empathetic. Like you. The Toms are logical and sensible. Like me.”

She tapped on one of her devices. “The probability is very close to one hundred per cent that we will get a good result.”

The Mage made a rude noise. “‘Sensible’ she says. Yes, my dear, my feeling is that they will choose the best option. Helen-two is going to find it a little tough at first though.”

It didn’t take long before the button was pressed and the Mage and the Boffin returned to the room.

“We’ve decided,” said one of the Helens. “I’m going to give up one baby to my other self.”

So she was Helen-two. She looked a little pale, while Helen-none who held one of the babies looked radiant and thankful. Tears made both Helens’ cheeks wet.

The Boffin nodded. “That’s what we hoped that you would decide. Here’s how we can help. We already gave you temporary false memories

to reduce your distress. We can install semi-permanent false memories so that you both remember giving birth to one baby each. That will align with the situation in your local spaces, but you won't forget what actually happened completely for a long time. It will sometimes reappear in dreams and reveries. In time the real memory will fade as the tear mends and the false memory will become the real memory."

Helen-two said "I'd rather not forget completely. Is there a way that I can follow the progress of my second baby and my other self? And what happens if I become pregnant again. Will it be twins again?"

The Mage looked at the Boffin. "The memories will fade," he said to the Helens and the Toms, "but we may visit from time to time and that will temporarily bring back the memories. We can also bring you all to a special place so that you can meet again, if you wish. In a better place than this one, though! Probably with sand and a beach. But eventually you will forget completely. I'm sorry."

The Boffin said "I calculate that if you get pregnant again, there will be only one baby. Though a consequence of the tear and its mending this way is that you can both get pregnant again."

Helen-none gasped. "Really!" she said delightedly. "Oh, how wonderful! Thank you, Helen. Thank you so much."

Helen-two hugged her. "You are welcome. This is by far the best solution."

"So, if you are all agreed, let's form a circle around the babies. Right, three, two, one, go!"

The Helens and the Toms and the babies disappeared.

"You do like your theatrics, don't you dear?" said the Mage.

"Well, yes, but they liked it too, didn't they?"

"You realize that we didn't actually need to do anything? That the tear would have fixed itself in no time if we had just left it?"

She turned to him and hugged him. "With a very high probability, that's true. An astronomically high probability, actually. Do you mind? It was worth it just to see the look on Helen-none's face when she realized

that she could have another baby. Though ‘another’ is the wrong word in some ways. Both Helens would have had a rough time for a while too.”

She waved one of her instruments, and she and the Mage were standing on a seashore. A small cabin at the top of the beach was shaded by coconut palms and draped in vines. Small dragons hopped about and scavenged in the seaweed, and dug into the wet sand for shellfish as the waves broke and retreated. They behaved just like shore birds do in human space.

The Mage looked at the Boffin. He knew this place, and there was something in her voice. “You’re thinking of having another baby yourself, aren’t you?”

“Maybe.”

The Mage took it as confirmation and groaned.

“Side effects,” he said resignedly.

It wasn’t that he didn’t like children. He did, and he loved all their previous children to bits. They just disturbed his routines. He hoped it would be a girl. He knew his wife well, and if it was a girl, she’d stop at one, most likely, but she liked to have sons in sets of three for some reason.

“Anyway, I’m going for a swim. Are you coming?” she said, and ran up to the cabin to get changed. So he put aside his reservations and followed her and soon they were splashing happily about in the lagoon.

The Great Scientist

“Have you ever wondered,” said the Boffin one day, “why we have never met ourselves?”

“Hmm, you mean when we are visiting other spaces, I’d guess?”

“Yes, that’s what I mean. The best theories say that all the spaces are splitting all the time, every time someone makes a choice, or even when someone tosses a coin. So there should be many, many spaces with a Mage and a Boffin. Some just like us, and some similar but different. Maybe with light skins and blonde hair.”

“Well, we don’t tend to visit nearby spaces, do we?” He thought for a bit. “Though I imagine that our favourite spaces, like dragon space, would be popular with Mages and Boffins from nearby spaces.”

“Yes, exactly.” She paused for thought too. “Maybe there’s an exclusion principle involved. The powers that we have may mean that we can’t coexist in the same space as another Mage and Boffin?”

The Mage pondered. “You may have a point. It could be that there is only so much power in each space, and a Mage and a Boffin are given a lot of that power and so there is not enough left over for another Mage and Boffin, but that doesn’t feel quite right. What do your equations say?”

“Well, it’s frustrating. There’s so many unknowns that I can’t tell. I can’t even formulate them.”

The Mage wound back the conversation in his head. “Where did this question come from? I don’t think it is one that either or both of us can answer easily.”

“Well, one of my alarms went off. When I queried it, it referred me back to ‘Mage and Boffin’. You haven’t felt anything recently, have you?”

The Mage scratched his head. He’d recently shaved it, and wasn’t sure if he was going to keep it that way. The Boffin kept kissing it which was annoying.

“Actually, there is something. Like someone needs help. It’s so faint I hadn’t really registered it until you mentioned it. Yes, it reflects back to us. You think it’s about some other Mage and Boffin?”

“Well, we’re not calling for help, are we?” She kissed his bald head.

He pulled her onto his lap, so she couldn’t do it again. “Let’s look at your data.”

She projected it on the wall, and the Mage studied it. “Yeah, it looks like it’s a long way away, but not distance-wise. It’s across the spaces.”

He pulled out a globe and passed his hand over it. “The Great Scientist? What’s that all about?”

“A variation of ‘The Boffin’ I’d guess.” She tapped her wristband device a few times. “Yes, that agrees with my data. Though there are anomalies. We’d better take a look.”

“Yes, tomorrow. And can you please stop kissing my head?!”

“You know, I’m not keen on you bald. Why don’t you grow it again?”

The Mage sighed. “Why didn’t you just say so?”

“It’s more fun this way!” The Boffin ran her fingers through his newly grown hair. “That’s much better.”

The next morning they reviewed what data they had.

“The Great Scientist is a long way off through the spaces,” said the Boffin, “but I don’t get a sense of the feelings side of things. There’s no Great Magician. Do you have the same?”

“Well, I do sense a focus for the Magical side of things, but it is weak, very weak. For that matter, the focus for the Scientific side of things is also weak. Suppressed maybe?”

“Maybe. Yes, if I concentrate, I can see them both.”

“OK, shall we go?”

“Yes, though I’ve a feeling that this won’t be fun.”

The Mage gestured and they flew through the spaces. This wasn’t like stepping to the dragon space, and each space that they passed seemed like a slap in the face.

“Phew! Not fun is right,” said the Boffin. “Where are we? It stinks!”

They were standing on a ledge jutting out into a deep valley. Down in the valley the lights of a city glimmered in the gloom. The sun was just rising and the sunrise lit up the undersides of angry purple and red

clouds. The waters of the harbour somehow looked unpleasant, even from a distance.

The Mage knelt down and pulled some leaves of grass out of the ground. “Oily,” he said and showed the Boffin.

“Hmm, yes, nasty. And the grass is yellowish too. Shall we walk down to the city?”

The trail down the mountain was steep and loose, making it difficult to descend. They passed several trees, most of which were dead.

The Boffin broke a small branch from a tree. “Pollution,” she said. “What sort of space is this?”

The sun started to fill the valley with a murky light, revealing the buildings down in the valley. Many of them were great blocks of buildings with few windows but with one or more chimneys, all of which were belching smoke and steam. The buildings themselves were grimy with pollution.

“What a horrible place,” said the Boffin. She coughed. “Ugh! Sulphur. Who would do this? If it is a person of my calling, well, then I’m disgusted with him or her.”

“I sense the person in charge is a ‘him’,” said the Mage. “How come the person of my calling didn’t do something about all this?”

They started to pass houses, though shacks would be a better word. They were mostly, it seems, made of reclaimed materials, a plank of wood here, a window frame there, with sacking covering the most obvious gaps. Most had a hole in the roof through which smoke was allowed to escape.

As they passed one small shack, one which was in worse condition than the rest, they heard crying. The Boffin poked her head into the open door. Inside a woman was leaning over a man who was lying on a bed, coughing, obviously sick.

“What’s wrong? What’s wrong with him?” the Boffin asked.

“He’s got the coughing disease, and today it’s so bad that he can’t go to the factory and work. We will be kicked out! We’ll be sent out into the desert!”

The Boffin ran her instruments over the man, but the woman jumped up in fright.

“No magic, please, no magic! We will be executed.”

“It’s OK dear, this isn’t magic,” said the Boffin, and directed a glance at the Mage. Her instrument buzzed and she looked at it.

“Hmm, chronic pulmonary disease. He seems to have been breathing pure poison for years. I’ll see what I can do.”

“It’s the gasses in the factory. They get to everyone in the end.”

“How old is your husband, dear?”

“Thirty five,” said the woman. “He’s quite old.”

The Boffin looked grim. She’d expected the woman to say sixty or more.

The machine buzzed and clicked again, and suddenly the man coughed and sat up.

“Thank you, thank you,” he said. “I have to get to work, or we will be cast out. I’m sorry, I have to go.”

The Mage and the Boffin looked after him in astonishment as he dashed out of the door.

“Oh, thank you so much,” said the woman. “But I can’t pay you! What with Walter being sick we haven’t any money.”

“You can pay us with information,” said the Mage grimly. “What sort of space is this? Why all the pollution? Who is looking after the environment?”

The woman looked blank. “Environment? What’s that? The pollution is something that we have to put up with for a while, until the Grand Plan works. Where are you from? Everyone knows about that.”

The Boffin got up and reached into her backpack and pulled out a thermos flask. “Do you have cups? This might take some time.”

The woman produced cups and the Boffin poured each of them a drink from the flask.

“What is this?” asked the woman. “It tastes so good.”

“It’s coffee. Do you not have it here? What do you usually drink?”

“Well, water, when it is not too full of poisons. Even the rainwater has some poisons. Also, there’s a root that we roast and grind and steep.”

The Boffin made a face. “What do all the factories produce? Apart from smoke and pollution, that is.”

“I don’t know exactly. Whatever the Great Scientist decides. It all goes into his Grand Plan. When the Great Scientist’s Grand Plan succeeds, then there will be no more pollution, and there will be food for everyone. It will be an Ideal World.”

“It doesn’t look like that to me,” said the Mage.

The woman gasped. “Don’t say that, sir, or we will be executed. Are you spies of the Great Scientist?”

“No, of course not. We are not from round here. When will this Grand Plan come to fruition?”

“No one knows. Soon, we hope.”

The Boffin snorted. “And when did it begin?”

“About two hundred years ago, I think. They taught us that, before they shut down the schools.”

“Shut down the schools?” muttered the Mage, outraged.

“Yes, it started when the Great Scientist took over, they said. He formed the Grand Plan and started building the factories. He cast out the Magicians, whose tricks were preventing mankind from creating the Ideal World.”

The Mage looked grim. “We need to talk to this Great Scientist. Where can we find him?”

The woman looked worried. “He will execute you or cast you out. Pleased don’t go and see him.”

“Don’t worry. We’re not as defenceless as we might seem. Where is he?”

“He’s in the Palace, under the Dome, down in the city. Please don’t go.”

“We have to. We’ll take care. You take care too.”

The Mage and the Boffin walked down the track into the city.

“Look what she slipped me when we left,” said the Boffin. She pulled a small stone with a hole in it from her pocket. It had a thin leather strap threaded through the hole.

“Mmm, a charm. Does it have any power?” He touched it. “Yes, but not much. Defensive. I’ve given it a touch more power. So there is magic here. It’s suppressed but not eliminated. There’s no sign of a High Wizard or anything, but there must be a focus, a nexus.”

The Boffin slipped it over her head and under her clothes. “I’ve got a feeling that I should keep it hidden.”

They rounded a corner and the city was spread out below them. All the buildings were dark, dingy and depressing, except at the very centre of the city where the Dome could be seen, glowing brightly in stark contrast to the rest of the city.

They hopped on a bus to the city centre. The Mage paid the bus driver with coins which appeared to the driver to be the dark metal currency in use in the city. The bus driver would be surprised when he looked at the coins later and found that they were really pure gold.

“Tsss,” said the Boffin. “We have to change our clothes. The men all wear trousers and the women wear long dresses. I’m wearing jeans and you are in your robes.”

She ran her instrument over them both and their clothes conformed to the local norm. “I hate dresses,” she said.

“Why do you have so many in your wardrobe then? On second thoughts, forget that I asked that question.”

They hopped off the bus close to the Dome. It glowed a bright blue, like a snow globe, which only served to show up the filth on the neighbouring buildings. The building inside was bright and clean, contrasting strongly with the dark and dirty buildings outside. They circled round and found an entrance with a large sign over it that read “Authorized Personnel Only”.

“That’s us,” said the Mage. “Authorized troublemakers.”

They passed through the entrance to the Dome and up the steps to the doors of the Palace. Two pages opened the doors for them.

“Mmm, it’s almost like we were expected. That’s a bit of a concern,” said the Mage.

They were directed to the Throne Room where the Great Scientist sat on an ornate throne decorated with images of test tubes, flasks, and Petri dishes. On one side of him was a three-foot-high model of a microscope, and on the other a similarly sized model of a Bunsen burner which shot out a ball of flame every minute or so.

The Great Scientist was a medium-sized balding man, dressed in a white coat and wearing wrap around safety goggles. He held a clipboard.

“Greetings,” he said. “I don’t know where you have sprung from, but from the way that you tended to that worker, I’m sure that you are here to interfere with my Grand Plan. I won’t allow it. In another three hundred years or so, I’ll be able to expand the Dome to cover most of the city and then the world.”

“So, until then,” said the Mage, “your citizens suffer and die prematurely in the terrible pollution out there.”

“What of it? Most of them are ignorant believers in Magic. When Science triumphs they will not be necessary and most will die. I will gather the scientists into the Dome and will have created the Ideal World. But until then they will be useful.”

He rang a small bell and a girl brought him a cup of tea. “I’d offer you a cup of tea too, but I’m going to have to imprison you until I decide what to do with you.”

He clicked his fingers and two large men moved forward to drag them away. The Boffin gestured and a glow surrounded her and the Mage, but the Great Scientist pressed a button on his throne and the glow faded.

“I won’t allow you to use your magical tricks in here, my dear,” he said. “Science will always win in a contest with Magic.”

“Why should it always be a contest?” asked the Boffin as they were led away.

The Boffin and the Mage were taken to adjoining cells below the Palace.

“Why does he need cells in his ‘Ideal World’,” wondered the Boffin. “It was interesting that he thought my barrier was magic. Somehow I

don't think that he is as 'Great' as he thinks he is, although that nullifier was a reasonably good trick."

She stepped into the Mage's cell. "Hmm, he doesn't know about stepping, it seems. We could leave now if we wanted but let's stay and sort this out."

"I agree. If he is the focus of Science in this space, I wonder who the focus of Magic is?"

"He's not the focus of anything, I believe. He's just a scientist with delusions of grandeur, I think."

The Mage gestured. He normally liked to hold something when he performed magic, but he didn't even have a stick. "Yes, you are right. There is a nexus of Science, and it's close, but it's not him. There's also a nexus of Magic, and that's close too. And getting closer."

Down the stairs to the cells came the serving girl and a boy in a white coat. The girl seemed surprised to find them in the same cell, but came up to the bars.

"Are you OK?" she asked. "We need help, and I sense that you can give it to us."

The boy had been fiddling with a security camera and joined her at the bars.

"It's already been disabled," he said. "I wonder who did that?"

"Oh, that was me," said the Boffin. "I didn't want him spying on us. All he is going to get on his monitors is my husband and I lounging around in our cells."

The boy nodded approvingly. "Looping, I suppose?"

"Yes, on a two-minute cycle. It will take someone a while to notice. Now, what do you want us to do? Do you have a plan?"

"Well not really," said the boy. "I can disable most of his weapons, but his throne has a special circuit that I can't get at."

"Give me your hand," said the Boffin, and the boy put his hand in hers.

His eyes opened wide. "Oh, **you're** the Scientist, and **he's** the Magician! We don't have female Scientists, or male Magicians."

“And you’re the Scientist and your wife is the Magician. That’s been clear from the moment we met you.”

The girl blushed. “We’re not actually married. We’re not allowed to get married as Terry is a scientist and must marry the girl that the Great Scientist picks for him. But we’ve been together since we were kids.”

She smiled at Terry and he smiled back.

“Are the scientists all behind the Great Scientist?” asked the Boffin.

“No, most of them think that what the Great Scientist is doing is a perversion of their calling. Many of them, especially the Biologists, think that he is a disgrace, but no one is prepared to stand up against him.”

“You two have a little power,” said the Mage, “but we will loan you some more. Let’s all join hands. Science is learned, young man, so it won’t make much difference to your power immediately, but it will reinforce what you already have. Young lady, Magic is feeling, and your powers will be boosted immediately. What’s your name, by the way?”

“Kitty. Well, Catherine, really. We have powers? Really? Oh, I feel it! Can you feel it, Terry?”

He nodded. “It’s a clarity and a sense of connectedness, but, sir, you’ve given me some power of feeling too. I can feel the cables in the walls and the power in them!”

The Mage nodded “There’s always a crossover. No one is completely on the side of Science or of Magic. Learn to use your feelings, young man, and you, my dear, learn to use the clarity and sense of order that you’ll get from your husband. Well, husband to be, that is.”

“OK, let’s get out of here. Stand clear, kids,” said the Boffin, and blasted the door of the cell which fell to the floor in a tangle of bent metal.

“Are you a bit tetchy, dear? That was definitely over the top,” said the Mage.

“Just a bit. I don’t like being locked up, even though I could easily step out.”

The Mage and the Boffin led Kitty and Terry up the stairs and towards the throne room. Two large men moved to stop them, but the Mage

gestured and the guards froze in position, and the four of them entered the throne room.

Behind them, one of the large men found that he could talk.

“Can you move, Jones?” he asked.

“Only my head, Smith. You too?”

“Yes. I hope that this wears off soon. This is an uncomfortable position.”

“Yeah, me too. When it wears off, let’s walk out of here. I’m definitely not going to run. Definitely not.”

“Is a fast walk OK by you?”

“Definitely.”

In the throne room the Great Scientist turned in surprise.

“How did you get out? Oh, those kids must have let you out.”

“It’s over,” said the Boffin. “You must step down immediately and leave the city.”

“You dare...” said the Great Scientist, and pressed a button on his throne. A line of fire shot out and hit the Boffin, who staggered. A glow surrounded her.

“You’re strong, aren’t you?” she said. “Thank goodness for that little amulet.”

The Mage sent a line of fire back at the Great Scientist, and a glow surrounded him as well. A stalemate developed with the Mage and the Boffin probing the Great Scientist’s defences, and the Great Scientist probing back. Power beams and force fields rocked the room, and projectiles smashed windows and singed upholstery.

Kitty and Terry were ignored for the moment.

“Can you hit the red tile to the left of the throne, Kitty?” asked Terry.

Kitty formed a ball of fire and hurled it at the tile, and the air filled with the fragments. Terry dived forwards under the beams of power and pulled loose a bunch of cables which had been covered by the tile. The Great Scientist’s weapons died.

“Nice move,” said the Boffin approvingly.

The Great Scientist leapt from the throne and ran towards the door. He turned around, said “Vengeance!”, pulled a gun and shot at the Boffin. The Mage stepped forward, plucked the bullet from the air and showed it to him. The Great Scientist disappeared through the doors.

“Nice going, kids. We would have beaten him eventually, because there are two of us, but that helped immensely, and reduced the amount of damage that would have occurred,” said the Boffin as she held both of Kitty’s hands. “Are you ready for the responsibility of your new roles?”

She briefly filled their minds with a feeling for what the jobs entailed, the responsibilities and the benefits. She reflected that she and the Mage had worked it out for themselves. Kitty looked at Terry, who put his arm around her.

Terry nodded. “Yes, we will do it. We’re ready. But how do we start?”

“Well, firstly tell everyone. That you are the foci of the two powers. Draw in all the raw power of Magic and Science that is out there, and gather it to yourselves. Then you can start to work out how to undo the mess that the Great Scientist has left behind. You can’t just shut the factories, as that will throw people out of work and create more chaos, but you can change what they make and how they are making it.”

“I can put temporary filters on all the chimneys,” said Terry.

“And we can make bricks and things, to fix up people’s houses,” said Kitty.

“Good ideas. But get some experts in. Get their opinions. I’m sure that there are good people out there. Is there anything else we can do before we go?”

“Go? Can’t you stay for a while? Please!”

“We’ll stay for a day or two, but you need to stand on your own two feet. Feel the needs. Work out the solutions.”

They were still very young and lacking in confidence, and in the end the Mage and the Boffin stayed a week. Kitty and Terry opened up the Palace to everyone and everyone came. The Mage or the Boffin were always at their side and passed them occasional little notes like “waste of time” or “seems good value”. People began calling Terry and Kitty “The Chief Scientist” and “The High Magician”, and Terry and Kitty didn’t

deny it. Their confidence grew noticeably as time passed. They called back Smith and Jones to help control the crowds, and started to set up councils and committees. They delegated some tasks to others.

So the Mage and the Boffin were there at the end of the week when the Chief Scientist and the High Magician were married, surrounded by old friends and new. By chance, as they were exchanging vows in front of the celebrant, a hole appeared in the dark clouds and illuminated the open air setting that they had chosen. The Mage looked suspiciously at the Boffin, but she shook her head. It was natural. Pure chance.

When they took their leave Kitty hugged and kissed them both.

“What if we screw up? What can we do?” she asked.

The Boffin held both their hands and told them to step after her. They appeared in front of the Boffin’s house.

“Welcome to our space. Welcome to our home.”

“Is that your house? It’s so nice!” said Kitty, and Terry nodded. Then they all stepped back again.

“Oh, that’s so easy! I didn’t know that we could do that.”

“Yes, when we came here first we had to go by way of many other spaces, and that was not nice. Now we have been here once, it’s so much easier. You’re welcome at our place any time, but we may be away. If so, just drop a letter in the letter box, and we will know immediately, wherever we are. Oh, and one piece of advice. You should step down as rulers as soon as you can. Find a nice cottage like ours somewhere, where you can raise your children in peace. Only interfere if you have to, as interference often makes things worse.”

Kitty looked at Terry. “We were saying the same thing earlier. Should we step down or do we need to be in charge? I’m glad that you mentioned that, as neither of us want to rule.”

“You will still be important people, with a lot of influence. One more thing,” said the Mage. “We have a space that we go to for a bit of peace and quiet. Our private space has no people but does have dragons. You should find your own quiet little retreat.”

The Mage said privately to the Boffin later “I think that they will do well. There were plenty of good people that visited the Palace, all suppressed by the Great Scientist. I’m optimistic about this space. I think we’d better find out where the Great Scientist ran off to, though.”

On a crag overlooking the city sat a man dressed in a tattered white coat. He’d lost his safety goggles and clipboard somewhere. Revenge and despair filled his mind. The Mage looked down on him from higher up the mountain and asked the Boffin “What are we going to do with him?”

“He’s more pathetic than evil, isn’t he?”

Suddenly the Great Scientist stood up, roared at the sky, and threw himself off the crag. The Mage and the Boffin both gasped and reached for him with all powers that they had, but to no avail. They stepped down to where his body had landed.

“What a sad end,” said the Boffin.

“He had some powers after all. He fought us off all the way down. Maybe it was for the best, as I couldn’t see him being happy anywhere.”

The Mage and the Boffin had quite a few visits from Kitty and Terry in the early years, with the youngsters seeking advice. Mostly they just let the two young ones talk until they had worked out a solution for themselves. Sometimes they inserted a suggestion. They liked the two youngsters who reminded them of themselves when they were just starting out. Then Kitty and Terry started bringing their children along, and the visits became more social than business.

The Mage and the Boffin visited their home space, and the changes were amazing. The dark dismal clouds were often replaced by fluffy white clouds in a blue sky. Even the grey rain clouds were an improvement. Terry, the Chief Scientist, had filters installed on the chimneys and developed a spray to remove most of the grime, and instead of dingy darkness, the brickwork on the houses and other buildings was bright and gleaming. Many of the hovels had been replaced with functional, if not beautiful, state provided housing for those who needed it.

There was a long way to go, but Kitty, as High Magician, was pleased. Almost everyone approved of the changes, and the man in the street was happier and more optimistic than when the Great Scientist was in charge. People began to feel proud of their city, which, stripped of its grime, was a striking place. The harbour now looked appealing and people had taken to walking on the beaches and sailing yachts on the water. Unfortunately the water wasn't completely clean yet but it wouldn't be long before people were swimming in the blue-green waters.

"Do you think you have an answer to your question, dear?" the Mage asked the Boffin one day, after a visit from Kitty and Terry.

"You mean when I asked why we hadn't met ourselves?"

"Yes, that's what I meant."

"Mmm. I've got an idea. Terry and Kitty remind me of us, but they aren't the same as us, are they?"

"They're really nice, but they're definitely different. The baby is cute, isn't she?"

"So is their little boy. He's, what, three?"

"Yeah, I almost feel like a grandfather. Yes, I know, I've been a grandfather so many times over the years."

"I know what you mean. But we've never met any Mage and Boffin close to us. Terry and Kitty are a long way away."

"That's true," he replied.

"Hmm. What about when we step **within** a space? We have assumed that in that case we really step between spaces, but the spaces are so close that they are indistinguishable. But if so there should be a Mage and a Boffin in that space, as it is so nearly the same as the one we started from."

"Ah, I see where you are going with this, my dear. The second space doesn't have a Mage and a Boffin because they are almost exactly like us and would have stepped too! Ingenious!"

"Oh, you guessed!" She was a little disappointed.

"Yes, but only because you started me thinking in the right direction."

She cheered up immediately.

“Yes, that’s true. I think that although we think of ourselves as being in a single space, we actually span a narrow band of spaces, and when we step, it’s as if all the Mages and Boffins step together. But it’s wrong to look at it that way because the spaces form a continuum and there aren’t separate Mages and Boffins.”

“Yes, I agree. But one consequence of this hypothesis is that we are almost certain never to meet ourselves.”

She nodded. “I’m glad of that. It would be weird.”

Three Wishes

The Boffin and the Mage were browsing around their local market. They had picked up all the vegetables and other odds and ends that they needed and had arranged for eggs to be delivered and had ordered some bread. They had reached the section of the market that the Boffin thought of as the “Entertainment Section”.

In this part of the market the travelling circuses and the sideshows were set up. Part of the reason that the Boffin liked to visit this section was to make sure that the scams were not too blatant and didn't separate the local citizens from too much of their money. A little money flowing from citizens pockets she considered reasonable, as it should teach them not to be too gullible, and the visitors needed to eat.

Partly she visited because now and then they came across someone in their line of business. A bush magician maybe, or a roving astronomer who would look the other way and cast horoscopes to earn his or her bread. Or a biologist with photographs and models of strange animals from distant parts, and maybe a cure for a crop disease. Then they would invite them home for a meal and a chat. They were generally interesting people.

On this occasion they came across a tent with a sign outside it that read “Three wishes, \$150”, and lounging outside was a turbaned man of more than average height, with glistening oiled muscles and a dark skin, darker even than the Boffin's. He had a beard and moustache, gold earrings and a gold chain and wore flowing robes which resembled the robes of an old time Eastlander. The Boffin couldn't put her finger on exactly why, but something about him whispered to her that he was the genuine article.

“\$150 dollars for three wishes is expensive,” the Boffin said to the turbaned man.

The Mage wandered over to see what his wife was doing.

“Well, if I put the price lower, people will buy the wishes, and I don't want them to do that.”

“Why not,” said the Mage.

“Well, I grant them their wishes, and they wish for silly things, or they accidentally wish for the wrong things, or they mess up the wishes in some other way, and then they get angry with me. Sometimes it’s a real chore to sort things out.”

He sighed.

“Why do you do it at all then?”

“I have to,” he said and sighed. “Do you want to come in the tent and I’ll explain. I can see that you are people of power. Maybe you will have some ideas.”

He took down the sign and showed them into his tent. There were three chairs in there and a small table with an ancient oil lamp, the sort made of brass and with a glass chimney. He poured them a strong coffee from a thermos flask.

“May I?” asked the Mage, indicating the lamp.

“Sure, but please don’t rub it,” said the turbaned man.

The Mage looked at lamp, but was careful not to rub it. It was inscribed with words of power, the sort that glow when you read them, but he didn’t know the dialect. He put it down again.

“If you rub the lamp you will get three wishes,” said the turbaned man. “I’m a Genie.”

The Boffin said “I thought that it was something like that. Is it genuine, my dear?”

“Seems to be,” said the Mage. “I can’t read the words of power on his lamp, but it looks genuine. But I thought that wishing lamps were supposed to be those teapot shaped things?”

“We are trying to move with the times. Well, maybe catch up a bit. Maybe one day we will go electric. Who knows? People do so like old things.”

“So, Mr Genie, what are you doing out of your lamp? I thought that someone had to rub it first to let you out, and then the wishes thing happens. Is that not the way it goes?”

“Please call me Mustapha. Well, I got fed up with the way that people kept messing up their wishes and blaming me, so I consulted the book, and found that there was no rule against me coming out of the lamp

before it was rubbed. It's the action of rubbing the lamp that grants the wishes, and it is only tradition that it summons me too. I am tied to the lamp though, and have to come if it is rubbed, and I'm not already out."

"What book is that, Mustapha?" asked the Mage.

"The Book of Rules and Regulations Pertaining to the Granting of Wishes on Rubbing a Magic Lamp'."

He gestured and an enormous book appeared on the table, causing it to creak under the strain. It almost knocked the lamp to the floor. The Mage grabbed it.

"That's the condensed version. The full version is nearly ten thousand pages long. Anyway, I discovered that I could come out of the lamp before anyone rubbed it. I tried warning people of the dangers of getting the wishes wrong, but they still did it and blamed me. I drew up a contract and got people to sign it, disavowing all responsibility, and they signed the contract and then screwed up their wishes and still blamed me. So I decided to charge them money to get their wishes, but they still did it, and still blamed me. So I put the price up really high and so far that has worked."

The Mage looked at the Boffin, and she nodded. "Mustapha, would like to come home with us? We can put you up for the night if you wish. We'd love to talk to you some more."

Mustapha smiled. "I'd love to," he said. "But my bed comes with me."

He gestured at the lamp. "Take me and the lamp home with you, and I'll invite you to visit **my** home."

"That's intriguing," said the Boffin.

So they drove home with the Genie in the back of the wagon alongside their shopping, cradling the lamp in his arms.

"How do you get about, Mustapha? Like this, carrying your home around with you?"

"Pretty much," said Mustapha. "Sometimes I pack it up and post it somewhere. Then I jump into it and travel inside it. I can step into it as long as it's reasonably close at the time. It's quite safe, and the lamp is

much stronger than it looks. Thanks for catching it when I dropped the book on the table, but it wouldn't have come to any harm."

When they got to the Boffin and Mage's cottage the Genie put the lamp down on the table.

"I'll just be a minute," he said, and disappeared.

"Hmm," said the Boffin. "That's not a usual step. We usually step **across**. He stepped **in**."

Mustapha reappeared. "Folks, I'd like to welcome you to my home. Can we please hold hands? Now step with me."

The Boffin and the Mage stepped **in** with Mustapha and found themselves in a very pleasant modern sitting room. The furnishing did run a bit too much towards gold threading and heavy drapery, but the carpet was a stunning swirling mixture of browns, deep reds, bright yellows and blues, all surrounded by a square zigzag border.

"Oh, Mustapha, it's beautiful!" said the Boffin.

"Thank you. In some ways it leans towards the traditional, but we like it. Can I introduce my wife, Fee and my kids?"

Mustapha's wife and children came shyly in from the kitchen, and they all shook hands. Fee also bowed with her hand on her chest, and the Mage and the Boffin returned the salute.

There were three children and Fee carried a baby.

"The oldest girl is Fi, and the twin girls are Fau and Fum."

"And the baby?" asked the Boffin.

"He's not had a naming ceremony yet, but he will be called Ishmael."

"I'll show you round our house, and then we can eat," said Mustapha.

"I hope that you won't mind me mentioning it, Mustapha, but you don't seem to be, well, as muscly as you were when we met you at the market."

Mustapha laughed. "Oh yes, that's sort of like advertising. A Genie is supposed to be large and full of muscles, but most of us aren't naturally made that way."

Mustapha's house was roomy and very modern. The kitchen was light and airy and had a number of well-used gadgets.

“Fee’s a marvellous cook,” said Mustapha. “We trade her cakes and her sweetmeats with others and make quite a bit from them. Are the kids allowed a treat, Fee?”

Of course there was immediate clamouring for something from the kids. Fee sighed and doled out some sweet crispy biscuits from a tin. The Boffin and the Mage sampled them too. The Mage noticed that somehow the Boffin was now carrying the baby. He wasn’t surprised, but he hadn’t seen it happen. She loved babies and babies loved her.

“Show them your workshop, dear,” said Fee, and Mustapha took them down a short corridor to his workshop.

It smelled of leather and wood and incense and glue. It seemed Mustapha worked mainly in wood, making chairs and stools with carved designs and mirror and picture frames also with elaborate designs carved into them. The style was distinctly Eastlander. He had cupboards and other furniture which he had made in the same style.

“We do well with Mustapha’s carpentry too,” said Fee. “It’s a pity that we can’t sell it ‘up there’.”

“Where you come from,” clarified Mustapha. “If I carry stuff up there it just crumbles.”

“What if it comes from ‘up there’ in the first place? Does it crumble after you’ve worked on it?”

Mustapha looked at Fee. “I’ve never tried that, have I? I wonder if that will work?”

Fee said “We’ll have to try it. Have you seen the view from our garden?”

They all walked out into the garden and the Mage whistled. “Wow, that’s different.”

The vegetation was strange enough, with tall thick stalked plants with prickly bulbous flowers on the top, like a pineapple on a stick, or a smooth stalked thistle. Smaller creeping plants with circular leaves stacked like plates covered the spaces between them. Trees abounded, tall and spreading and similar to trees “up there”, but with a purple tinge to their trunks and foliage. Vines looped between the trees carrying great bulbous fruits of various colours like an unlit line of light bulbs.

In the actual garden, though, Fee and Mustapha were growing plants that the Boffin recognized. Tomatoes, peppers, cucumbers. Various herbs in a square patch, and some sort of root vegetables further over.

The sky was totally different from “up there”. It was all swirls of colours that slowly changed as the spirals rose and set. Small bright points, maybe moonlets or satellites rapidly crossed the horizon in mere minutes. Much further out than the swirls of colour and the racing moonlets but still close was a large orange red planet with rings like Saturn. It followed the sun as the two bodies crossed the sky in a stately place.

“Oh that’s beautiful, Mustapha. Do you have stars at night?” asked the Mage.

“Yes, but not as many as ‘up there’. I was so amazed by your night sky when I first went ‘up there’. Here the night is rarely pitch dark as the Planet is often up in the sky, or the swirls of colour, which we call the High Winds, light things up.”

“I notice that you grow vegetables from ‘up there’. Is that for visitors?”

“No, I believe that we Genies, or Djinns, as we are sometimes called, originally came from ‘up there’, and we mostly eat food which comes from there. Some of the native stuff is edible, but it generally doesn’t taste nice. Some does though. This herb is native. It’s called ‘Bitter Berry’.”

Mustapha plucked two small fruits from a plant in the herb garden and gave them to the Mage and the Boffin.

“Mmm, a smokey flavour with a bit of a tang. Yes, that would make an interesting sauce,” said the Boffin.

“Yes, and on that note, let us eat.” Mustapha ushered them back into the house, and they sat down to eat.

Fee had prepared a table full of small dishes, cooked in the Eastlander style.

“Fee, this is marvellous!” said the Boffin, “I thought that I knew Eastlander style cookery, but there’s so much here that I don’t recognize. How did you cook this all so quickly?”

“Mustapha told me that you were coming when you left the market, and er, I used a little magic to help things along. You’re not offended, are you? There are dishes here that have been forgotten in recent times. Recipes that come from my mother and Mustapha’s mother.”

“No, of course we aren’t offended. We do that sometimes too,” said the Boffin. “Oh, and are you offended by wine? If not, I’ll step home to get a bottle.”

“Sure,” said Mustapha. “I don’t drink, but Fee sometimes has a glass.”

So the Boffin stepped back home and located the bottle of wine, and also a small block of wood. She stepped back into the lamp and presented the bottle of wine to Fee, who poured a glass for the three of them. Then they settled down to tasting Fee’s cooking.

“Mmm, this is so good, Fee. I must get some recipes off you!”

“Thanks for the block of wood, Boffin. I know just what I want to carve in it.” said Mustapha.

“You go and carve something, dear. I can see that you are itching to. We’ll just carry on chatting,” said Fee.

She served them strong dark coffee in small cups. The Boffin had somehow ended up with the baby again. The Mage himself was teaching Fi, Fau and Fum some simple conjuring tricks. Fi was guessing which hand the coin was hidden in almost all the time. The Mage frowned and cheated a little and Fi, laughing, still got it right. Hmm, some power there, thought the Mage.

“So, how far from the nearest town are you here, Fee?” asked the Boffin.

“We don’t have any towns as such,” said Fee. “We’re very spread out. Somebody has something to sell, they put the word out, we all turn up and put up our tents in a field and bring our stuff to trade. At one time we didn’t have permanent homes, but these days we have mostly settled down.”

She thought a bit. “Maybe we will start to build towns as the population grows. Our nearest neighbour is a lot closer than he used to be. But many of us like our temporary tent markets.”

“How do you keep in touch, Fee. You’re pretty isolated here.”

Fee laughed. “Oh, we use globes, which are not unknown ‘up there’, are they?”

The Boffin nodded. “Yes, but not everyone uses them. How do you get around? There don’t seem to be any roads.”

“By carpet.” Fee indicated the marvellous carpet under their feet. “Those are also known ‘up there’, aren’t they?”

“Yes, but they are rare. So rare that most people, including me, thought that they were mythical. Fancy that!”

“Oh, I didn’t know that. I’ve not been ‘up there’ very much since we had the kids. It’s a strange space, isn’t it? Oh, but not for you, I forgot. I’m sorry.”

“That’s OK. It’s sometimes strange for us too!” The Boffin laughed.

Mustapha came back just as they were talking about the differences between the two spaces. “We ought to spend more time up there, Fee. There so much to learn there. Most of the advances in our space have come from there, one way or another. Our kitchen. Our bathroom! My tools in my workshop. Some of our medicines. Our people originally came from there, of course.”

“Your space is lovely, Mustapha. But it doesn’t yet have schools and universities,” said the Mage. “I think that you will do, in the future. I hope that you are able to import the good things like schools and universities and not the bad things, like pollution and poverty. By the way, if you want to visit, you and your kids are welcome to stay with us if you want.”

Mustapha smiled. “Thank you for the offer, but we are by nature travellers. The lamp gives us a place to stay, wherever we are, ‘up there’. But we’ll definitely visit, if we can. If we send the kids up there to school or even university, we may take you up on that offer.”

He continued “I was wondering if you had any solution to our problem of the lamp, though. You are people with power. I can tell that.”

“You have your own powers,” said the Mage. “Fee casually mentioned using magic to help things along when she was cooking. Little Fi has quite strong powers, I noticed. We are not well versed in your types of powers, but maybe we can advise you. Is there anything in the rules that says that the lamp must be a certain shape and size?”

“No, nothing, except that it must be capable of giving light, and it must be made of brass. The original lamps were brass, of course.”

The Mage clicked his fingers and said “What about this?”

He held a brass filigree case, shaped like a heart and hanging from a necklace chain. He pressed a button on the side and the top opened, revealing a knurled wheel. He flicked it and a spark from a flint set light to a wick dipped in fuel. It was a delicate little lighter.

“You can make it look like that?” asked Mustapha. “But what happens when I go into it? In the past the wrong people have found it, and silly things happen. They wish that they are wealthy and then find that it doesn’t make them happy, or they lose it all. Or they wish for a beautiful wife, and she turns out to be vain and a nag. Something like that always seems to happen. Most often the third wish is to return things to the way they were.”

“Well, you can put it in a safe place, like deposit box in a bank, or something like that. You could hang it around your neck! It’s not a perfect solution of course. You told us a story of a Genie who hid his lamp in a cave protected by a spell, and it still was found, wasn’t it? That’s just an early version of the deposit box. I can give you a charm to hide it, but it won’t be completely unfindable. Meanwhile, I’ll research the lamps. I have a friend who is an expert on Eastlander spells and charms. I’ll give you his address.”

Mustapha nodded. “Thank you for that. I’ll go and visit him. As far as keeping the lamp safe, that’s about what I’ve been doing. I’ve been hiding it, but now and then someone finds it. I can’t create a charm to hide it, because of the rules, but I didn’t think of getting someone else to do it. That’s double protection, isn’t it?”

The Mage said “Someone must have created the lamps, and there must be a way to alter how they work. I think that because of the way that the wisher usually ends up worse off than before he or she made the wishes, that the creator was very upset about something. I’m just sorry that we can’t be more help.”

“Thank you, Mage, and you too, Boffin, for all your help,” said Mustapha. “It’s been great to be able to talk these things over with someone who understands the problems that we are having. People with power like you are rare.”

“Anyway,” he continued, “please tell me what you think of this.”

He passed the carved piece of wood to the Boffin. She gasped.

“Oh, that’s amazing,” she said. “Look, dear.”

She passed the piece of wood to the Mage. He saw an intricate carving of the likenesses of himself and the Boffin in bas-relief. His likeness held a stylized flame in the palm of his hand, while the Boffin held a pair of dividers and was measuring a globe.

“Oh my goodness,” he said. “This is your test piece to see if it crumbles ‘up there’? It’s almost too good to risk! If this survives, may we keep it?”

“I carved it for you,” said Mustapha. “To thank you for your help and for visiting us. We don’t get many visitors from ‘up there’, and we really appreciate it.”

“Well, we’d best be going,” said the Mage, “if you can pry the baby away from the Boffin. Please all come to breakfast in the morning. We’ll cook pancakes.”

Little Fi’s eyes widened and her mouth opened.

“Please can we go, Dad?” she asked.

Mustapha looked at Fee.

“That’s should be OK,” she said. “We’ll knock on the front door though when we come. You don’t want people suddenly appearing in the middle of your kitchen!”

“Are you coming with us, Mustapha, to see how your carving fares?” said the Mage.

The three of them stepped up to the Mage and Boffin’s house, the Mage carrying the carving.

“How long does it take to crumble, Mustapha?” he asked.

“Almost immediately,” said Mustapha. “It looks like the trick worked. I’ll have to start importing timber down home. I’m kicking myself for not thinking of it before. Thank you for the idea, and thank you for inviting us for breakfast. It will be the first time that we’ve brought the kids up here. They’re going to be so excited. I’d better go and help Fee calm them down. Goodnight.”

He disappeared.

“Nice people,” said the Mage.

“Very nice. I don’t think that we’ve met a Djinn before, have we?”

“No, I don’t believe we have. I was surprised when he stepped in, weren’t you?”

“Yes, I was. But I thought afterwards that we do know something about the microscopic levels, electrons and protons, and all the other particles. I don’t know how that relates to Mustapha’s space, but my guess is that it does. Hmm.”

The Mage knew that the Boffin would be pondering what she had learned for months or years, and possibly doing some experiments. It was part of her nature. He himself would be doing his own thinking and research in his own way. The old books. Similar spells. And he would likely do some experiments too. His sort of experiments.

Some months later the Mage got a letter from his friend, the one who was interested in Eastlander spells and charms. He told the Boffin about it.

“It seems that Han and Mustapha have been able to modify the spell on the lamps. Hmm, he calls it a charm. Anyway, Han tells me that the charm I put on the lamps to deter people is working and Mustapha reports that no one has rubbed his lamp in ages. But more importantly, they’ve managed to ‘switch off’ the wish charm, so that rubbing the lamp has no effect. Mustapha says that some of his people don’t want to switch off the charm, so it’s good that the charm has to be modified lamp by lamp.”

“That’s great, dear. Does Han say anything about Mustapha’s carpentry business?”

“Yes, apparently Mustapha’s carving are fetching high prices. He still makes furniture, but gets more for carvings like the one he did for us.”

They both looked at the carving, which the Boffin had mounted on the wall.

“Han says that Fee sends her love, and so do the kids. Apparently Fee’s kids and Han’s kids were running riot, while he was writing. They all seem to be having great fun. Fee and Mustapha often bring the kids up here now.”

“I must ask them all to stay soon,” said the Boffin. “It’s a good thing Fee and I swapped charms so that we could keep in touch.”

“A charm? You?”

“Yes, one of the first that you taught me, so long ago, my dear. Is that so surprising? Scientists always cross their fingers before they perform an experiment. Didn’t you know?”

The Duplicated Man

One summer evening the Boffin and the Mage were sitting outside enjoying the sunset when a young man came up the drive. He passed through the Boffin's detectors and the charms and spells of the Mage let him through, so he didn't appear to be dangerous. They watched him approach with interest.

"Good evening," he said. "Am I correct in assuming that you are the Boffin and the Mage of this space?"

The Boffin and the Mage knew what he meant when he referred to 'this space'. Another name that they sometimes used for the same thing was 'this Universe'. The Mage and the Boffin knew that their space or Universe was surrounded by other spaces or Universes that had at some time in the past split from their space or Universe. The Boffin's students, annoyingly she thought, liked to refer to this theory as the parallel or alternative world theory.

So, their visitor was claiming to come from another space or Universe. Since the Mage and the Boffin frequently visited other spaces or Universes by 'stepping' to them, they knew that it was possible.

"Yes, we are," said the Mage. "Can we help you?"

The young man sagged. "Oh, I hope so, I really hope so. May I sit down? I've travelled a long way and stepped through many worlds, some of them nowhere near as nice as this one."

"Come on into the house," said the Boffin. "We were about to go in anyway."

The Boffin led him to the kitchen, which is the room that they used most of the time when the Boffin wasn't in her laboratory and the Mage wasn't in his study.

"Would you like some tea? And maybe one of the Boffin's cakes?" asked the Mage. "Then you can tell us your story. What's your name, by the way, and where do you come from?"

"My name is Thomas. Tom for short. I come from a space quite a long way away, over there." He gestured.

"Ah. Did you pass through a space where Kitty and Terry are the foci of Science and Magic."

Tom nodded. “Yes, and they recommended that I search you out, and, by the way, they sent their regards and said that they were going to visit soon.”

“Oh good. They’re nice people and so are their kids.”

The stranger nodded. “Yes, very. They tried to help me with my problem, but we ran out of options after a while. So they suggested that I should seek you out. They were very busy at the time with the elections. People insisted on consulting them, they said. Terry said ‘It isn’t hard work, but we have to do it. Almost all the time it consists of just listening, then letting people make up their own minds. For some reason people think that you are wise when you do that. We interfere as little as possible and the difficult part is to convince people that we don’t support any particular option. The Mage and the Boffin taught us that.’”

“Yeah, we had to work it out for ourselves,” said the Mage. “We could have saved a lot of heartache if we had realized it earlier. Anyway, Tom, tell us about yourself. What is your problem?”

“Well, how old do you think I am?” asked Tom.

The Boffin ran an instrument over him.

“Good gracious! According to this, you are three years old. But you look, what, twenty-five, twenty-six? Can you explain this?”

Tom sighed. “Yes, that is exactly my problem. I was born twenty-six years ago into a loving family. My father is a banker and my mother is a teacher. My parents named me Rhys, a family name, and I have an older brother and a younger sister. I did well in science at school, and my parents sent me to Central University where I studied physics.”

The Mage glanced at the Boffin. “They named you Rhys? But why do you call yourself Tom?”

“I’ll come to that later,” said Tom.

He continued. “I gained my degree, and stayed on to do research. We were studying matter transfer, under the direction of a professor of the school. We, that is Gareth and I, wanted to be able to transport people from, say, the Earth to the Moon. You do have a Moon here, don’t you?” he asked, suddenly worried.

“Oh dear. Matter transfer,” said the Boffin. “Yes, we do have a Moon. Most human spaces seem to have at least one large Moon.”

Tom looked at the Boffin. “You know about matter transfer?”

“Well, only in theory. Matter transfer operates at a level below the normal macroscopic level. We call it the quantum level, and it’s a level governed by probability, roughly speaking. Pretty much anything can happen, but usually doesn’t. Roughly speaking. Generally it’s easier to move things from one place to another by the usual methods than to use matter transmission.”

“Anything can happen, as you say, but usually doesn’t. Sometimes it does, though,” said Tom, nodding. “And that’s my problem.”

“We had built a machine, Gareth and I,” he continued. “We’d transmitted blocks of various elements and simple compounds from one station to the other, and they had disappeared from the one station and appeared, unchanged so far as we could tell, in the other. So we sent bacteria. They seemed fine. We sent guinea pigs. They appeared unharmed. So we decided to go for the big one. We drew lots to see who would be the first human to be transferred. I won, or lost, depending on how you look at it.”

“Did you have no failures?” asked the Boffin.

“None at all. If we had we wouldn’t have tried the human transfer. But we were so keen to make history, and, ironically, that’s what we did.”

The Boffin nodded. “Go on.”

“So I stepped onto the transfer plate. I was feeling great. I had no qualms whatsoever. I gave Gareth the thumbs up, and he hit the switch.”

“What did you feel?” asked the Boffin.

“Well, nothing. One instant I was on one side of the lab, standing on the plate, and the next I was on the other side of the lab, standing on the other plate.”

“I’m guessing something went wrong,” said the Mage.

“So, I’m sort of getting ready to cheer, but Gareth was looking at the other transfer plate and saying ‘Oh darn, what went wrong’ and I saw myself step off the sending plate.”

“Ah. So your machine duplicated you instead of transferring you?” said the Mage.

“Yeah, and all hell broke loose. There was two of me. I remembered appearing on the receiving plate, but he didn’t. For that reason Gareth and the other me reasoned that he was the real me.”

“What happened then?”

“Well, we stopped the experiments of course. The University wouldn’t have let us continue anyway. Then there was a big discussion of what this all meant. And finally we all decided to leave it for the night. I and my duplicate went to our car and had a bit of a discussion about whose car it was and who should drive. I let him drive. When we got home, he said that he would make the guest bed up for me. I was outraged at first, but I gave in. My mind was telling me that he was the ‘original’ me, and that I was a duplicate.”

He sighed. “Then the trouble started. Every time that anyone spoke to ‘Rhys’ both of us would answer. So we decided that I should be called Thomas, which was our middle name. Tom for short, of course. But as far as the authorities were concerned, I didn’t exist. I wasn’t born, I didn’t go to school, I didn’t have a flat, I didn’t have a job, and what is more, I didn’t have any money.”

“Oh, Rhys helped out, of course, since he essentially was me and could understand my situation. He was closer to me than a brother. We argued with the University that they had a responsibility to me, since the experiment was sanctioned by them, and so they offered me a job. But it took a long time to convince them.”

“Then of course, I needed ID. So we went to the authorities, who proved to be a much harder nut to crack. Well, our story was incredible, wasn’t it. They needed proof, which of course we didn’t have. Only the logs of our experiment. In the end they settled for a signed and authenticated letter from our Professor, and I got my ID, but it was only a temporary one. So Tom now officially sort of existed.”

“With my ID, I could get a bank account, driver licence, and all those things that one needs to get by these days. I started back at the University and life started to return almost to normal. People at the University used to think that we were twins. At least, those who didn’t know what had happened did.”

“Our co-workers acted a bit odd around us. They talked to Rhys and pretty much ignored me. As one girl said, apologetically, ‘You’re not the

real Rhys, are you?’.”

“In the end, I’d had enough and decided on a fresh start. I saw an advert for a job at Southern University and decided to apply. I told Rhys, and he laughed and showed me an advert for a job at Northern University. ‘Let’s put the whole country between us, eh?’ he said. So we did.”

Tom paused. “Did I mention my family? I don’t think I did, did I? They were, obviously, shocked by the whole thing, but they eventually took it in their stride. Mum even claimed to be able to tell us apart, but she was just kidding herself. My sister said that she wished that she had a duplicate, so that they could share homework and things like that. My brother wasn’t there. His Army unit was off somewhere rebuilding a bridge that had been damaged in floods, but he sent his love and his hope that we’d be able to fix things.”

“Anyway, we showed them the job adverts, and Mum, of course, didn’t want us to go so far away. Dad however nodded his head. He could see that we needed space to grow apart. So I headed south and Rhys headed north, and after that we only saw each other every few months.”

“It sounds like you made the best of a bad thing,” said the Boffin. “But what happened next? What caused you to step so far from home?”

“I was just getting to that. One day Rhys phoned me. ‘Are you going to go home for Sissy’s birthday?’ he asked. ‘I’m bringing someone that I want you all to meet.’ I hadn’t been meaning to, but he was so mysterious, and wouldn’t say any more, so I booked my flight the same day. As it happens I arrived earlier than Rhys and found out that Mum, Dad, and Sissy had no idea what Rhys was up to either. So Dad and I drove back to the airport to pick up Rhys and his friend.”

“Rhys came down the tunnel holding hands with a girl. My heart leapt when I saw her, and I knew. I knew we were in trouble. I knew without a shadow of a doubt that Rhys had fallen in love with her and was going to announce their engagement.”

“I see where this is headed,” said the Mage. “You, of course, also fell in love with her as you and Rhys are, to all extents and purposes, the same person. Oh dear.”

“Yes, exactly. That weekend was terrible. Rhys did announce their engagement, and we all congratulated them. Milly, that was her name by the way, was so happy, but when she was introduced to me, she was puzzled. I cornered Rhys when she wasn’t around and found that he hadn’t told her about me. All he had told her was that I was his twin! At first, I was annoyed, then I realized that I would probably have done the same, if things had been the other way around.”

“Did he tell her?” asked the Mage.

“Yes, eventually. After we had spent most of the weekend with her calling me Rhys and calling Rhys Tom. It was when she tried to kiss me, thinking that I was Rhys, and I refused, though I obviously wanted to, that she realized that something was wrong. So we three sat down and Rhys told her about my origins. Of course, she then remembered that we had been in the news.”

“How did she take it?” asked the Boffin.

“Very well. She looked at me and said ‘You love me too, don’t you?’. I said ‘Yes, of course. But I won’t cause any trouble, I assure you. I want you to be happy. Both of you.’ She thought a bit and said ‘Will that be enough?’.”

“Was she right? Was that enough? I suspect not, because here you are, wandering through the spaces, looking for an answer,” said the Boffin.

“I tried hard. I really did. I stayed away from them as much as I could. I only went to family gatherings if I had to, and I spent a lot of time and effort dating other girls. None of it worked. I came to hate the other me, the original. Though I didn’t really, of course. I had fantasies where he died. Then I regretted my thoughts. I pretended that I hated Milly, but of course I didn’t. I contemplated suicide. I regularly got drunk. I didn’t resort to drugs, but I considered it. I was, frankly, a mess. The last straw was the wedding.”

“Ah, that must have been hard.”

“Yes. The silly thing was that I sincerely wished them well. I wanted Milly to be happy, and my other self too. He was or rather is me, after all. Well, I went to the wedding. I saw them happily married, and the only cloud was me. I decided that something needed to happen and soon, and the funny thing was, so did they. They dragged me aside at the party after the wedding. ‘We think that you need to do something, Tom,’ said

Rhys. ‘You are cracking up before our eyes. So we think that you ought to go and see our friend, Sandra. She’s a psychiatrist, but that’s only one part of her skills. If you consult her, she may be able to help you.’.”

“What did you think of that? Had you consulted any doctors about this before they suggested it?”

“Funnily enough, no. It sort of seemed like admitting defeat. ‘Promise me you will go and see her,’ said Milly. Then she kissed me. Not a simple peck on the cheek, but a full-blown mouth-to-mouth, breath destroying kiss. ‘I promise,’ I said, somewhat stunned. Rhys clapped me on the back, and smiled. I’m pretty sure they’d talked it out beforehand.”

“Milly, and for that matter, your other self, seem to be smart people. Did you go and see the psychiatrist?” asked the Boffin.

“Yes, with mixed feelings. I didn’t think I was nuts, but I was a bit frazzled. Sandra was a clever person, and made some helpful suggestions. She knew about me of course from the news and of course, Rhys and Milly had told her about me as well. It was such a comfort to tell someone, other than Rhys and Milly, about my problems and Sandra really listened. I was feeling positive for the first time. I could handle this! I told Sandra, but Sandra said ‘Well, any improvement is likely to be only temporary. Every time you see Rhys and Milly it will be like a slap in the face.’ She was just being realistic.”

The Mage nodded. “Yes, she was right. Twins sometimes suffer from this sort of envy. But did she propose any solution?”

“Yes, she did. She knew of my work, well, our work, and she knew about other spaces, though the current jargon is ‘alternative universes’, I believe.”

He hesitated. “I don’t think that Sandra was a focus for Science or Magic, like you are, but she knew about stepping. She showed me how to step to other spaces. I was amazed. I was a scientist, but there were whole new spaces out there, which science, our science, knew nothing about, except theoretically.”

“Yes, People in Science dominated spaces tend to forget how to step quite early on in human development. Any sentient being and quite a few semi-sentient beings can step. It’s just that humans have forgotten how to do it,” said the Boffin. “So, she showed you how to step. Did she have a reason to show you?”

“Yes, she thought that it should be simple to find a space where there was no Rhys, but there was a Milly. Then I could move into that space, and Milly would fall in love with me. It turned out that it wasn’t that simple. It seemed that where there was no Rhys, there was no Milly either. I don’t know why, and neither did Sandra.”

“That’s interesting,” said the Boffin looking at the Mage. “We’ve thought about this a bit, haven’t we, dear?”

The Mage looked thoughtful. “Yes, We’ve noticed that some people form strong bonds. Like Kitty and Terry. The Boffin and me. And, it seems, Rhys and Milly. Other people form bonds which are not as strong, or maybe just different. Like Rose, who has been happily married twice. Or Leon, who hasn’t been married and seems quite happy with the situation. Maybe those who form really strong bonds can’t exist in spaces where the other partner does not exist. It’s just a guess.”

“Yes, but we don’t really know if it is true or not. It sounds possible though,” said the Boffin. “So, Tom, what happened then? You’ve been roaming the spaces, maybe looking for the impossible, and eventually you’ve wound up here?”

“Pretty much,” said Tom. “I quickly discovered that in some spaces, certain people were the centres of power, of the forces of Science and Magic. Most often there were two of them, but sometimes there was only one, and occasionally the powers were spread over several people. Then I stumbled on the space where Kitty and Terry were the foci. They were kind enough to try to help me, but when they couldn’t, they recommended that I try to find you. They said that you were the most powerful people that they knew. They described you as the archetypes, but I don’t know what that means.”

“That sort of means ‘the originals from which others are made’,” said the Boffin. She looked at the Mage. “We’re definitely not the originals, but we are closer to them than most. We did have predecessors.”

“Do you think you can help me?” asked Tom, desperately.

“We’ll do our best. But let’s sleep on it. I’ve got some ideas, but we’ll have clearer heads in the morning.”

So they all retired for the night. In the morning the Boffin and Tom quickly disappeared into the Boffin’s laboratory. The Mage dropped in on them, but they were busy scrawling equations and bullet points and

diagrams on the Boffin's whiteboard and computers, so the Mage smiled, made them some coffee, and left them to it. He retired to his study to consult his books of lore and his grimoires. Then he cast a few searching spells, researched his books again, consulted his crystal ball and generally investigated in his own way. But he already had some ideas.

He made them omelettes for lunch and dragged them out of the laboratory and made them sit down and eat.

"Any luck?" he asked.

"Well," the Boffin said, "we've found the errors in the original field equations, and we've pretty much patched them up so that they more accurately represent what happened. We believe that there was a one in ten chance that the duplication happened, and we can reduce that to one in ten thousand. We're confident that we can reduce it to one in ten million or so fairly easily, and..."

"How does that help?" interjected the Mage.

The Boffin and Tom looked at each other. "Well if we can understand what happened..."

"Then you can stop it happening again. But it has already happened. What about that?"

The Boffin said "You are right, dear. We haven't been addressing the real problem. Do you have any ideas?"

"Oh, I'm working on a few things," said the Mage and sauntered off.

The Boffin watched him go. "He's up to something," she said.

She turned to Tom and said "Right, let's reconsider our approach...."

At the end of the week the Boffin and Tom were looking glum.

"Well, at least we've made some advances in the science," said the Boffin. "Those may be useful in the future, but as for your problem, Tom, we've not been able to make any progress."

"Where's the Mage?" asked Tom. "Has he made any progress?"

"Huh, he'd not tell me until he was sure. He's gone off to town for something, and he wouldn't say what. He's being annoying."

Just then the front door opened, and the Mage called out. "I'm back! And I've someone here I'd like you to meet."

He walked into the kitchen, where the Boffin and Tom were drinking coffee. Following him was a young lady. Tom started.

“Milly? Milly, what are you doing here?” he asked.

“Hi, I’m Lilly,” said the girl. “You must be Tom. I’m pleased to meet you.”

“L-lilly? You’re not Milly?”

She shook her head. “No, I’m not. In the same way that you are not Rhys.”

The Mage tried to pour himself some coffee, and found that only a dribble was left. “Huh! You could have topped it up. Scientists!”

The Boffin took the coffee jug from the Mage and went to make some more. “Why don’t you tell the story from the beginning, Lilly? I bet it’s a fascinating tale.”

“Oh, OK,” said Lilly. “It all started while I was studying at Central University. It had the best school of Magic, and I didn’t mind moving down from the north.”

“That’s odd. Northern had the best school of Magic where I come from,” said Tom.

“Yes, so the Mage told me. He’s told me all about you.” She blushed a little.

She continued. “Anyway, it was there that I met my boyfriend, Rhys. Yes, I know that is your original name, Tom. We were going out with each other for about six months and were thinking of getting engaged. He told me about their experiment, and I was really interested. In the Magic school, we’d been trying to do much the same, though we were trying to use it to move large objects around. We called it a ‘lifter’ and we were getting somewhere, but the boys and girls in the Science school seemed to be further on than we were.”

“There was always rivalry between the Magic and Science schools, but it was friendly rivalry. We often swapped insights, and Rhys offered to show me their experimental setup. So I visited Gareth and Rhys in the lab one day and watched them move blocks of metal and wood from one station to the other. They were ecstatic. They sent some microbes from one station to the other, and tried it with some rabbits and it worked.”

“We used guinea pigs,” said Tom.

“Then they looked at each other and said ‘What about a human?’ They discussed the risks and so on for a while, but I knew they were going to do it. ‘Who then?’ said Gareth and looked at me. Rhys immediately objected, but Gareth pointed out that it needed both of them to do the transfer.”

“That’s funny. We only needed one. Oh, but if we hadn’t picked up that stabilizer circuit, we would have needed two,” said Tom.

Lilly continued. “Well, in the end, we all agreed that I would be the first person to be transferred. I remember Rhys said ‘This will make you famous.’ He wasn’t wrong! I stood on the plate and watched as Rhys and Gareth operated the machine. I suddenly found myself on the other plate, and I was just about to cheer when Rhys said ‘What went wrong? There was a power surge, but she didn’t go.’ That’s when Milly stepped off the sending plate. She saw me at the same time as I saw her, and we both shrieked. Then everything went crazy.”

She looked at Tom. “You know what happened then, don’t you, Tom? We were front page news for a few days, but then some politician got caught embezzling money, and it sort of faded away. But there I was, with no identity, with a boyfriend who now suddenly had two identical girlfriends. Well, the school of Science did their best to help, helping me with sorting out my ID problems and the school of Magic offered me a job. It was fine for a while, but Rhys kept mistaking me for Milly and vice versa, and it was plainly not working.”

“Finally Milly, Rhys, and I had a talk. We decided, well, I decided really, that I should get out of the situation and I transferred to Southern. It was down there that I met Sandra, who was working as a counsellor and therapist. She introduced me to stepping and suggested that I look for a space with a Rhys but not a Milly. Well, I knew about stepping in theory, and I knew that some people did it, but I hadn’t thought that it could help me. I couldn’t find any spaces with just a Rhys but then I finally got lucky!”

“Let me guess,” said Tom. “You met Kitty and Terry?”

“Oh yes! They are lovely people, and their kids are lovely too. They told me about you, Tom, and I realized that I needed to find you.”

“We think that couples who have a strong bond like Rhys and Milly are never found alone, across all the spaces. That’s what makes your situation so tragic, you two,” said the Boffin. “But you eventually met Terry and Kitty.”

“Yes, I was just about giving up, and they gave me the strength to carry on, so I stepped this way until I got here. I visited the Mage’s old friend in the school of Magic at Central University, and you know the rest.”

“We don’t,” said the Boffin, looking crossly at the Mage who was trying not to smile.

“My friend listened to Lilly’s story,” said the Mage, “and contacted me. He put her on a plane to here and I picked her up at the airport. And that is how she got here.”

“Hmm,” said the Boffin suspiciously. She would have a word with the Mage later.

After lunch, the Boffin suggested that the two young people take a walk down to the lake. They accepted with such alacrity that it was obvious that they both been trying to figure out a polite way to be alone together. She watched them until they were out of sight, but they were hand in hand well before that. The Mage came and stood beside her.

“They’ll be OK,” he said. “After all, they are just correcting an anomaly.”

“Yes, dear. Do you think that there are any more Lillys or Toms out there?”

“It’s very unlikely.” He showed her his crystal ball. He knew that she was adept at reading it.

“Oh yes. I see. That conjunction of lines fades to nothing there, and that other group of lines joins it. It’s a definite zero in my terms. Ah, that agrees with our equations too! We couldn’t see why we were getting nulls all over the place. That explains it!”

She turned to him. “Right, now explain yourself?”

“Explain what, my dear?” he said innocently.

“You know. How did you get her here, and how did you know she even existed?”

“Ah, that. Well, like I said, Tom was an anomaly, and the space he was in couldn’t autocorrect itself because there was already a Rhys and a Milly there. So another space nearby introduced the correction, Lilly. Of course it was a space with a Rhys and a Milly. Now they are together there is no anomaly. A bit of a tangle in the spaces maybe, but no anomaly.”

“I guessed that there had to be a Lilly,” he continued, “but I didn’t know for sure. But there were an infinite number of spaces with Milly and Rhys in them, and only one with a Lily in it as well, if she existed. Well, maybe not one space, but a very small range of spaces. No wonder they couldn’t find each other. I also guessed that Sandra or Sandra-like people might exist in multiple spaces. The ones that step often do, so I sort of sent a broadcast to all the Sandra-like people to look out for a Lilly and direct her our way. Once they were away from the ‘Milly and Rhys’ spaces, it was almost certain that they would find each other.”

“Smart ass,” said the Boffin lovingly. “You’ll have to show me how you did that some time. I suppose the Sandras didn’t realize that they had received a message? It would be like a feeling or intuition, right? So how did you know Lilly had arrived here? Oh, you warned your friend in Central that she might appear looking for us.”

“Exactly. I think my approach won out this time,” he said smugly.

“Yes,” she said grudgingly, “I suppose. We’ll have to find them a nice space with no Rhys and Milly in it. That shouldn’t be too hard. Tom’s a pretty good scientist. What about Lilly?”

“Yes, she’ll do well in my field. She’s got the intuition and the empathy.”

He sighed and put his arm round his wife. “Another happy ending. Another problem solved.”

She kissed him. “That’s what we are here for, after all.”

Together

“I wonder about you and me, sometimes,” said the Mage one day.

The Boffin considered. They’d been together so long that they might only speak a dozen or so words to each other in a day. They knew each other so well that they didn’t need any more than that to communicate their wants and needs and, more importantly, to express their affection and love for one another.

So the Mage was not talking about them as people, as husband and wife, but about their roles as “Mage” and “Boffin”. She was aware that she often did things which were, strictly speaking, not part of her role as the supposedly scientific “Boffin”. But the Mage himself wasn’t shy of using scientific and mathematical methods, especially statistics. He was very good at statistics.

“We’ve never been stuffy about our roles, have we?” she said.

“Mmm. But you’re very protective of our kids. That’s an emotional trait.”

“I don’t deny it. But you flattened the walls around that town when the King captured our daughter. You broke into the dungeons to get to our sons when they were imprisoned by that other King. You practically stormed the school when that girl was bullying our other daughter. You...”

“OK, OK. You’ve made your point. Parental feelings don’t count with respect to our roles!”

They were silent for a while.

“You are wondering if we will end up so similar that for all practical purposes, so far as our roles are concerned anyway, that there will be little point in saying that I’m the Boffin and you’re the Mage? Hmm.”

She came and sat next to him on the sofa. He put his arm around her, and she curled her feet up on the seat and leant against him.

“My analysis is that our empathy for the other point of view was one of the reasons that we were chosen, all that time ago. Possibly the main reason. Everything is interconnected, I say, and I know you agree. You might call it magic and I might call it science, but there’s really little difference. You say magic is about feelings, but you are one of the most

logical people I know. And science is about logic, but you know what happens when one of my experiments doesn't produce the result I expect?"

"Yep, you sulk for a day or two."

"I do not sulk! I merely spend a day or two reviewing the experiment and considering the possible reasons for its failure."

"You sulk."

"I wouldn't call it sulking. I'm not happy though. Anyway, we look at things from different directions but come to much the same conclusions. We'll never change our fundamental ways of looking at things. But we might borrow things from each other's way of working. You did a nice analysis of the poison that the crazy man tried to use on the Prince, by the way. That's an example of what I am talking about."

"Thank you. Though it's not nice to call the poor man 'crazy'."

She acknowledged his point.

"Yeah, you're right, of course. At least now he's got someone to look after him, and the charms and the medicine should help him out."

She turned to him. "So what do you think, my dear? Are we turning into each other? A Boffin-Mage or a Mage-Boffin? What do you feel?"

"I think that we should exclude the parental emotions from consideration. Everyone has those as you pointed out. See, I'm analysing things like a Boffin! Also things move from the realm of magic to the realm of science all the time, but the realm of magic doesn't shrink. What is an atom but a little bundle of magic, after all? Most people don't know or understand the science of it. Feelings and intuitions are still my way of looking at the world, but, even before we met, I would always double check with logic and reason. I think that everyone is part Mage and part Boffin, and we are no different. We'll never have the same world view, and we'll never merge our roles."

He kissed her and she kissed him back. Somehow this was a confirmation and resolution of their discussion.

"So, why the question?" she asked.

"There's something in the air that I can't put my finger on."

He emphasized this by creating a small circle of light in the air with his finger. The Boffin gestured at it and it floated over to her. She stretched it and positioned it over her head.

The Mage laughed. “A halo?”

He gestured and was sitting with his arm around a small devil, complete with horns and tail. The halo looked incongruous.

“Huh,” she said and became herself again. She waved the halo out of existence.

“Let me see,” she said pulling an instrument out of her pocket. She projected the readings on to the wall so that they both could have a look.

“Nothing is registering. Well, there’s low level disturbances, but that’s fairly normal. Quantum. Oh, and it’s going to rain tomorrow. Can you see anything?”

“I agree. Nothing. There’s a little bit of a control struggle, down on the right there, but that’s likely to be local politics, I think. Nothing serious.”

She could tell he was frustrated by his feeling that something was not right. “You know I trust your feelings, dear. Let’s just keep an eye on things for a while. It might be something just below the level of the physical, and it might disperse in a day or two, or it might become clearer.”

He knew she was trying to ease his frustration, so he kissed her. “Yes, let’s do that.”

She was projecting the readings onto the wall of her laboratory a couple of days later when the Mage came in. She noticed him coming and held out her hand to him, and he took it.

“You were right, my love. I still don’t see anything specific, but something is definitely going on. Those low level disturbances are increasing. The whole display is varying from green to yellow. If I focus on a small area I don’t get any detail. Do you get anything with your charms and spells?”

“No, but it’s across spaces, I think. What do your instruments say about that?”

She frowned and tapped some commands into her computer. The screen cleared and was replaced by single wave which slowly waxed and

waned.

“That’s odd. It is across spaces but I can’t tell the direction. I thought I’d fixed that problem.”

“I think the effect is increasing, whatever it is,” said the Mage.

“Is there anything we can do?” asked the Boffin.

“Polish up our spells and charms? Dust off our equations?”

He put his arm around her. “We don’t know what direction the threat, if it is a threat, is coming from. We don’t know what the threat even is, if it is a threat. We have our amulets, powered by your science and protected by my magic. There’s something about this that is disturbing you, isn’t there?”

“It’s the fact that we can’t get a hold on whatever it is. It’s all so vague.

Just then there was a tentative knock on the door, and the Boffin’s screen went red.

The Mage smiled and said “Showtime! It looks like we are about to find out.”

He kissed his wife to reassure her, and they went to open the door. Outside were a young boy and girl in their early teens. They were shabbily dressed in clothes that were meant for people much bigger than they were, and they looked thin and hungry. They also looked terrified.

“May we please sleep in your barn?” the boy asked tentatively. “We’re very tired. We won’t cause any trouble.”

The Mage’s instincts kicked in. “Come on in,” he said. “I think that we can do better than a barn.”

The two young people edged into the house.

“Sit down at the table, you two. I expect you’d like a bite to eat,” said the Boffin.

She got out a loaf of bread and cut a couple of slices from it. The girl stared at it and couldn’t help licking her lips. The Boffin got out some butter and ham and made a couple of sandwiches, which were demolished in next to no time, so she made some more.

“What are your names, and where are you from, my dears?” asked the Boffin.

The Mage made some cocoa and gave two steaming cups to the two young people.

“My name is Carl and her name is Lynn. We won’t cause any trouble. We’ll leave in the morning.”

“Where are you from?” the Boffin asked again.

Carl looked at Lynn.

“Well, sort of over there,” he said, gesturing.

The Boffin looked at the Mage, puzzled?

“How did you get here?”

“We sort of, erm, stepped.”

“You’re from a different space? Where, exactly?”

The boy gestured again. This time the Boffin caught the direction he meant. It was different to the directions that the Mage and the Boffin usually stepped.

“Hm, we’ve never stepped in that direction. I didn’t even know it existed,” said the Boffin. She made a quick note to herself on her computer. “That’s probably why we couldn’t figure out where the disturbance was coming from.”

“You know about stepping? Disturbance? Are you a witch? Are you a spy for the High Witch?” asked the girl.

The two young people looked like they might make a run for it.

“No, no, we don’t even know this ‘High Witch’,” said the Mage. “Are you running away from her or something? You are safe with us. I am an expert in magic and my wife is a scientist of some repute.”

“A scientist?” The boy and girl looked at the Boffin in amazement and fear. “You’re not going to experiment on us are you?”

“Good heavens, no. Is that what you think scientists do? Experiment on people?” asked the Boffin.

“Yes, cut them up. Force poisons down their throats. And laugh while they do it,” said Lynn.

The Boffin was shocked and speechless.

“Who told you that scientists do that?” asked the Mage. “I promise you that my wife will do none of those things!”

He was almost laughing, but the young people seemed serious.

“Why, everyone knows that,” said Carl. He hesitated. “Is it not true? There are no scientists any more where we come from.”

“No, it’s not true. Scientists are simply seekers after truth. Much like magicians. They just use a different approach. They certainly wouldn’t experiment on people like you describe!”

The Boffin recovered herself. “So, you appear to be fugitives. Are you running from the High Witch? If so, why does she want you?”

“We don’t know. Some of the High Witch’s soldiers came to Lynn’s house. Her grandfather, the one who taught us to step, told us to go, to step away. He said that he’d hold them off. I think he’s dead.”

Carl broke off to comfort Lynn.

“Poor kids,” said the Mage. “You’re not brother and sister then? What about your parents?”

“No, we aren’t brother and sister. I don’t remember my parents. Lynn’s parents disappeared years ago. I was assigned to Lynn’s house by the High Witch’s men when I was small, almost a baby. We grew up together. I don’t remember anywhere else.”

The Boffin looked at the Mage and tilted her head towards the pair. He nodded and said to the pair “Please give me your hands a moment.”

The two extended their hands and the Mage took them, only to jerk like he was stung.

“Ow! You have powerful protection. Is that your own? Let’s try again.”

He extended his hands to the two young people again. This time he held their hands for a minute or two before letting go.

“Thank you for letting me in. You are two powerful people. My guess is that the High Witch has somehow discovered that you might be a threat to her. Is that what happened?”

“We’re powerful?” Carl looked at Lynn again. “Are we? No one ever told us that. It can’t be true.”

The Mage tossed a ball of fire at Lynn, who swatted it away with a gesture. It bounced off a wall and fell behind the sofa and the Mage hurriedly put it out.

“Do you know how did you did that, Lynn?” asked the Boffin, laughing.

“I don’t know. I don’t know how I did it. I just did it. Did I do something wrong?”

She was almost in tears.

“No, dear,” said the Boffin. “My darling husband was just proving to you that you do have powers, and singed the carpet in the process. Can I hold your hands?”

The Boffin felt a strong protection force as she joined hands with the two. No wonder the Mage had jumped. She pushed past the protection which let her through and felt the two strong young minds behind it. She looked at the protection and decided that the two young people were the source. She looked at their minds and saw that they had a very strong bond. The power that they had was shared, and came from both sides, magical and scientific.

“Wow. Complex and strange. Thank you for letting us in. I don’t think that either of us could have got in if you hadn’t let us.”

“Look,” said Lynn.

She was holding a ball of fire much like the one that the Mage had tossed at her. She tossed it at Carl who caught it and looked at it. Then he tossed it back and created one of his own. Then they tossed the two balls of fire backwards and forwards between them, laughing. Finally, Carl squeezed the two balls out of existence.

“Wow,” said Lynn. “What else can we do?”

The two young people were no longer scared and looked much more confident.

“Hmm, just a minute,” said the Boffin.

She left the room and returned with one of her devices from her laboratory.

“This is broken,” she said. “I know what needs to be done to it to fix it. How about you two take a look at it?”

The two young people looked at it.

“I’ll have to open it,” said Carl.

The Boffin indicated that they should go ahead. Carl twisted the case and it fell apart into two pieces.

Lynn and Carl studied it. Lynn looked up.

“Do you have any...”

The Boffin slid some wire and some tools across to them. Carl ignored the tools and cut some wire with little bursts of fire and fixed it in place inside the device.

Lynn twisted the device back together and pressed the button on it. The dial lit up but nothing else happened. She twisted the device apart again, and the two of them peered at it again.

“That one?” she asked Carl, pointing at a component.

“That’s my guess. Do you have...”

The Boffin slid a component across the table. Lynn unfixated a component with one of the Boffin’s tools and fitted the new component in its place. She closed the case and this time the dial lit up and showed some numbers and directions.

“How did we do that?” asked Carl. “I’ve never seen one of those before! What is it?”

“It’s just a power meter. You used intuition, which is a skill on the magical side of the scale to fix an instrument which belongs to the physics side of the scale. That’s quite unusual, though not unknown. You two have both magical and scientific talents in equal measure. Oh, by the way, we prefer to use the tools. To use magic for simple physical repairs, like you fixed the wiring, Carl, is showing off a bit. Though to be fair, I’ve done it myself when I can’t find the tool.”

Carl nodded.

The Boffin said “Tell us some more about the High Witch. Does she often send her men out to bring people in? I guess that if she just asked, people would make themselves scarce.”

Carl thought a bit. “She sends out her men to arrest people, and they are never seen again. That’s what happened to Lynn’s parents. Gramps said that they didn’t take us because we were so small. Some people say that she drinks blood, but I think that’s just a story. Anyway, everyone obeys her. They’re scared of her.”

“But you got away.”

“Yes, Gramps suddenly got up and told us to hold hands. Then he said ‘Step out of here, my loves. Remember me and remember your Mum and Dad. Now, step!’. So we did, and we were in this space. We wandered around for a few days and ended up on your doorstep. Lynn said ‘This place feels good. Let’s knock on the door.’. So we did.”

“You think it was the High Witch’s men? What happened to your Gramps?”

Carl reflected. “Yes, I heard the Witch’s men outside the door. As we were stepping Gramps collapsed, though I didn’t see why.”

“How would you like to stay with us for a couple of days? It should be safe enough.”

Carl looked at Lynn. “But we seem to bring trouble down on everyone we meet.”

Lynn looked into the far distance. “Yes, we should be safe here for a day or two. Are you sure?”

“Of course, dear. Now, how would you like a bath?” asked the Boffin.

She took them off one by one and showed them the bathroom. They weren’t too happy about being separated, but loved the Boffin’s state-of-the-art bathroom. The Boffin laid them out clothes which her own kids had used, and they returned looking much less like a pair of waifs and strays. Lynn’s hair had a coppery sheen while Carl’s hair was very fair, almost white.

The four of them passed the evening playing board games and generally chatting about the differences between the kids’ space and their own space. Carl and Lynn were amazed to learn that the ruler was a normal person, with no special powers.

“How does he make people do what he wants, if he has no powers?” asked Carl.

“Why, he asks them nicely,” said the Boffin, “and because he is King, they usually do it.”

“But what if they don’t want to do it?”

“Well, there’s usually a reason. So they tell the King the reason, and then they negotiate a compromise. A good King only asks people to do

things that they won't mind doing, though sometimes the King has to convince them. Or vice versa."

She thought a bit. "It's like your Gramps telling you to go to bed. He has no special powers, but you do it anyway. Or you discuss with him why you should be allowed to stay up longer."

When the young people were in bed, the Boffin threw up her readings onto the wall of the room. The Mage came and circled her waist with his arms from behind.

"Is this the latest readings?" he asked. "It looks pretty much OK. All green. But you aren't happy."

"Yes, it's all green at the moment. I've wrapped that camouflage charm of yours around the house, just to be safe, though. It'll look like we are the only ones here."

"That'll not fool anyone with real powers though."

She nodded. "Yes, and look what happens if I project it a week out."

She gestured and the numbers changed and then suddenly the colours changed to red.

"Hmm, not nice," said the Mage.

She turned in his arms and hugged him.

"I'm not going to back away from a fight," she said. "I'll not abandon those kids to whatever fate awaits them. I just can't."

"Neither can I. You know I won't. We've got a few days, and they are quick learners. The trouble is, we don't know what the threat actually is. We know it's almost certainly caused by the High Witch."

She kissed him. "It's funny isn't it. The more we study, the more we know. But we didn't even suspect that we could step in that direction. We've got things working pretty well in our own human space here. But now we seem to be attracting couples like Carl and Lynn. Remember Kitty and Terry and how we helped them? Maybe our roles have changed slightly, and our job now is to help these young couples, the powerful people from distant spaces, find their feet?"

"Maybe. I wouldn't mind that too much. I'm never bored, and it would be interesting. Anyway, let's go to bed."

In the morning the Boffin explained what they were going to do. “We are going to teach you as much as we can in the next week or so, but it’s going to be hard. There’s a crisis coming in about a week’s time, and we’ll do our best to help you get through it.”

“Maybe we should just go,” said Lynn. “We don’t want to drag you into it.”

The Mage shook his head. “It’s coming anyway, whether you go or stay. I checked my oracle. We just have to get through it, and the best way is to make you two as strong as possible. Do you understand how important and powerful you are?”

“Us? No, we’re not grown-ups. We’re not important. We’re not powerful.”

“Stop that!” snapped the Boffin. “You need to believe in yourselves. It’s critical.”

She grabbed the two of them in a containment field and made them immobile. Carl went red in the face with effort and his hand crept slowly towards Lynn’s, as hers did towards his. When they touched, the field collapsed. Carl and Lynn both gasped for air.

“We did it!” she said. “

“Pretty good, but you need to be better.”

This time the Boffin separated them before she sent up the containment field. Lynn and Carl struggled hard but couldn’t break the field.

“We can’t do it! Oh no,” wailed Lynn.

“Yes, we can,” said Carl. “We just need to work together. We don’t actually need to touch!”

“Oh, of course,” said Lynn, and the field collapsed.

The Boffin considered. “That wasn’t bad. Pretty good, actually,” she said. “Now the Mage and I can work separately, but it seems that you two **have** to work together. You’re different in that respect. Let’s take a break now.”

They worked with the kids, sometimes alone and sometimes together. Lynn and Carl were learning really fast and sometimes the Boffin and the Mage had to extend themselves a little, which they considered to be a

positive. But the Boffin knew that they were nowhere near as strong as the High Witch was going to be.

On the fifth day, the Mage declared a holiday, so they stepped to the dragon space. Immediately the Boffin knew that something was wrong. Something was bobbing in the waves, and she ran down to see what it was. It was the corpse of a dragon. She spun around. The little shack was in ruins. Their belongings were scattered around the beach and the vines that draped the shack were dead and faded.

“Ahhhhhhhhhh!” she screamed and lightning flashed from her raised arms into the sky. Then she cried.

“Logic, dear, logic,” said the Mage, who was grey and shaking. “Emotion is not going to serve us well, here. Logic.”

“Oh, my dear, you must feel it worse than me. I’m so sorry. I must concentrate!”

But she fired off another bolt into the heavens first. Just to stop her hands shaking.

The Mage stepped forward and a ball of lightning hit the dragon’s corpse and it disappeared. He turned and gestured and the shack became whole. Their possessions lifted from the ground and disappeared into the shack. Another gesture and the dead vines disappeared. It was a grandiose use of magic, but he didn’t care.

“We’ll let the vines grow back naturally,” he said. “I’ve put a protection spell around it, which we should have done before. Well, now we know that the High Witch is actively looking for you two. She must have detected our connection with you and searched for us because she couldn’t see you. How petty she was, to destroy our lovely shack!”

“We’re so sorry,” said Lynn. “We had no idea that she would be able to trace us. We’re sorry she destroyed your shack.”

“Don’t worry, dear. That can be fixed, but I feel angry about the poor dragon. I’m sure that we would have met up with the High Witch, sooner or later.”

“I agree,” said the Boffin. “Right, logic. We should take the fight to her before she does any more damage. Oh, our cottage! Let’s get back, quick.”

They stepped back worriedly, but everything was fine. The Boffin threw her latest readings on the wall.

“Well, there’s you two, Lynn and Carl.” She pointed to a blue patch with numbers which rapidly fluctuated. “The program doesn’t know quite what to make of you. I can fix that later. Then there’s this blue patch which seems to be getting closer. It’s not the Witch, it’s not bright enough. I think that we are about to get a knock on the door. Stay here, you two.”

She went to it and opened it. Two large men stood there, one with his fist raised to knock on the door.

“Hullo ma’am, I’m Smith and this is Jones. We are looking for two fugitives, and we believe that they are here.”

“Was it you two who killed the dragon and wrecked our shack?” asked the Boffin with a tinge of steel in her voice.

“No, ma’am. That was a bad business. Some youngsters given weapons that they shouldn’t have been trusted with. We would not do that. We are professionals.”

“Suppose that I told you that the ‘fugitives’ were not here?”

“Sorry, ma’am, I would not be able to believe you. Our information is correct, I believe.”

“Suppose the two ‘fugitives’ were here, and we refused to give them up. What would you do?”

“Well, ma’am, we would have to report back, and no doubt further action would be taken. Not by us, I might add.”

He managed to give her the impression that the whole thing was distasteful to him.

“You’d better come in. Please note that we have defences in place.”

“Thank you, ma’am,” said Jones. “We understand. We don’t intend to cause any trouble, I assure you.”

The Boffin led the way to their kitchen where the others were waiting.

“This is Smith and that is Jones, everyone. They are looking for two fugitives, they say. Dear, can you make them a cup of tea. Please sit down, gentlemen. Biscuit?”

“Thank you, ma’am and sir. That’s very kind of you.”

“So, what exactly is your mission, gentlemen?”

“We are to locate and return two fugitives who have escaped from our ruler, the High Witch. We have been given this location as the place where we can find the fugitives, and this device to get us here and back.”

He showed the Boffin the device. Neither he nor Jones acknowledged the presence the two young people. They were without doubt professionals.

“So the Witch had nothing to do with the dragon and our shack?” asked the Mage.

“No sir, not directly. It was just some idiot kids she’d sent to look for the fugitives. Just so you know, sir, the dragons appeared over the city and smashed a few things, made a few holes in roadways and bridges and disappeared. No casualties, except someone who fell into a hole. The High Witch couldn’t touch them, though she put on quite a firework display.”

He nodded his approval of the dragons’ actions.

“You don’t seem to like her much, gents.”

“She’s our employer, sir. We can’t have an opinion about her.”

The Boffin and the Mage glanced at each other. They liked Smith and Jones.

“Well, Smith and Jones, suppose we were to agree to you taking the two fugitives back, but only if you took us, too, would you have any objection to that?”

“You don’t have to do that!” said Carl.

“We do,” said the Boffin. “It still annoys me that she sent the people who killed the dragon and wrecked our shack!”

Smith looked at Jones. “That’s OK by us, sir. We have no orders to the contrary.”

“We are all agreed, then?” The Boffin looked around at the Mage and the two young people.

“Then let’s do it.”

Smith and Jones stood up. “Please hold hands,” said Jones. His partner took out his device and Jones held his wrist. They all joined hands in a

circle and Smith pressed a button on the device and suddenly they were standing in the courtyard of a castle.

The Mage looked around and sniffed. “Too ornamental. A castle should be functional.”

“This way, please,” said Smith, and the two big men directed them into the castle.

As they walked through the corridors to meet the High Witch, the Boffin looked around.

“I see what you mean, dear. I mean to say! Suits of armour every five metres. Crossed swords and shields on every wall between them. Huge tapestries. Arched doorways, leaded windows. It’s a bit much,” she said.

The throne room was an immense room with a vaulted ceiling, with leaded glass windows high on the walls and behind the throne. As they walked towards the throne, the backlighting meant that they couldn’t see who was on the throne.

Torches on the wall suddenly burst into flame, and curtains covered the windows behind the throne, and the High Witch was revealed. She appeared to be a young woman in her low thirties, and she was wearing a low cut green dress which clung tightly to her body. The Boffin immediately hated her even more than she had before.

“Hi, Your Witchiness. I understand that you are looking for our friends here,” the Boffin said, deliberately trying to be offensive.

She gestured at Lynn and Carl.

“Thank you for returning them,” said the High Witch, visibly controlling herself. “They were about to cause me a great deal of trouble.”

“They were? Why is that? By the way, I said nothing about returning Lynn and Carl. They are under our protection.”

“Yes, they were about to serve as a focus for forces opposed to me. My mirror warned me. I don’t allow opposition.”

She smiled. “So they are under your protection, are they? Whose protection are **you** under?”

The High Witch gestured and the Boffin could not move. The Witch laughed and the two young people marched like robots to stand beside

her. The Boffin desperately struggled to free herself from the spell or field that was holding her immobile. She could imagine that the Mage was struggling similarly. Nothing seemed to work.

Suddenly she heard the Mage's voice in her head. "Don't struggle, my dear. Use your logic to find a solution, and I will try to use my gifts to find one too."

The High Witch looked at the Mage. "Hmm, you're cute. Come and join me."

The Mage's voice in her head said "Concentrate, my dear! Concentrate!"

To her horror the Boffin saw the Mage out of the corner of her eye move towards the High Witch. He was taking reluctant step after reluctant step towards her. His brow was sweating with the effort of resisting, but he was being forced to approach the High Witch.

She tried to shout to Lynn and Carl. She tried to form the word "together". The next thing she knew was the ground coming up to hit her in the face and the roar of the word being repeated at her.

"TOGETHER!!"

The Mage came to, lying on the floor just below the steps to the throne.

"What happened?" he asked. "Ouch, my head."

"The High Witch lost the fight. I'm not sure how, but the power came through me and Carl," said Lynn. Little sparks were still crackling from her fingers. There were singe marks at various places on the floor and the throne had lost an ornament from the top of the back.

The Mage gingerly climbed to his feet and ran over to where the Boffin was lying on the ground supported by Carl. She was bleeding heavily from her nose.

"I don't lige dis," she said thickly. "I dink my dose is brokerd."

The Mage ran his finger down her nose and the bleeding stopped. Her nose straightened but forever afterwards had a slight bend in it.

"Thanks, dear. What happened?" said the Boffin.

"Pain relief?"

"Just a little, please."

The Boffin looked around. Not much had changed apart from the marks of the battle, but the Witch was cowering on her throne. Her facade of youth had evaporated, and she looked closer to sixty or seventy.

“So much for using my powers of logic to figure out a solution. All I could think of was to stop her taking the Mage away from me. Then I was trying to tell Lynn and Carl to work together, and the floor hit me in the face,” she said.

“We got your message,” said Carl. “We were trying to work together but it wasn’t making any difference. Then we sort of extended our reach and suddenly the power was flowing in, and we easily overcame the Witch. I don’t understand it. You two fell over and knocked yourselves out when she let go of you.”

“I think I know what happened,” said the Boffin, tapping her pocket device. “Magic and Science work differently here from our home space. The power is spread over everyone. Back home and in most spaces, certain people, like us, have the power and channel it, and most people have little or none. Here, the power is not concentrated but certain people can channel it. You have to call on it, which you accidentally did. If we’d known, we could have trained you differently.”

“How did the Witch get her powers then?” wondered Carl.

“The same way as you did. She drew on the power which is spread through everyone. The power of Magic and Science is not good or evil. It’s how you use it. Boy, was she strong! But enough people must have had enough of her, so the Science and the Magic flowed to you and not her. We should never have faced her directly.”

“I think that you are right. That’s what happened, though we didn’t know it at the time,” said Carl. “We’ve still got some of the power that we called on.”

“But what about the Witch? What do we do with her?” asked the Mage.

“The Witch can do nothing.,” said Lynn. “She has no power now, and is unlikely to be able to gather any again. The mood of our space is against her.”

The Boffin drew on the power of the space to check, and saw that it was as Lynn said. Working this way was strange, but strange in a nice way, and when she considered the space itself the word “friendly” came to mind. She doubted that it would have seemed like that ten minutes before.

Lynn walked over to the throne and the former High Witch flinched away.

“She doesn’t even remember what happened. She’s just scared. She doesn’t remember being the High Witch. We’ll find her a home somewhere where she can be looked after properly. The poor thing’s mind is partly destroyed.”

Lynn calmed the former Witch with her mind then she and Carl sent her off with Smith and Jones, with orders to find her a home. Smith and Jones could be trusted to do the right thing.

“What will you do now, you two?”

“Well first we’ll bring back all the people that the Witch made disappear,” said Carl. “The power of Magic and Science in this space didn’t give her enough power to destroy them, it seems, so they are in a sort of limbo. Then we will have to start to work out how this space should be governed. We’ll probably hold some elections eventually. Let the people of the space decide.”

The Mage said “You are both still very young. I suggest that you get Smith and Jones to help you out at first.”

Carl nodded, then thought a bit. “Oh, it seems that Gramps had a heart attack and the Witch’s men took him to hospital. We’ll go over and see him later. Not all the Witch’s men were infected by her spite, it seems.”

“There’s one thing that I must do before we go,” said the Mage.

He gestured, but nothing happened.

“Gather the power first, dear,” said the Boffin.

“Oh, yeah, of course. I forgot,” he said, and gestured again.

Four youths in military uniforms appeared. They reacted in shock and surprise.

“You four killed a dragon and wrecked our shack. What do you have to say for yourselves?” asked the Mage.

“We thought that the dragon was attacking us, sir!” said one of them. “We used our weapons in our own defence, we thought. We only realized afterwards that it was just interested in us.”

“Hmm,” said the Mage.

He could see that they were telling the truth. A swooping dragon could look as if it was attacking, and that is what he saw in their minds. “But what about our shack? Why did you wreck that?”

“We’re sorry, sir. The High Witch sent us to find the two fugitives, and we conducted a thorough search. But then things got out of hand, and we ended up wrecking it, sorry sir. It was stupid of us, sir.”

Again the spokesman was telling the truth. The Mage thought that maybe some of the spite of the High Witch had spilled over into the boys. They didn’t seem to be bad boys, and were definitely regretful.

“You’re very lucky, lads. My wife was very angry when she saw the dragon and even angrier when she saw our shack.”

The troopers looked at the Boffin and changed into wobbling jellies, figuratively speaking.

“We’re truly sorry, sir. What is our sentence?”

“Sentence?” The Mage had not thought that he was judging them, but they obviously did.

“Well, I sentence you to four weeks community work. Make repairs on the roofs of a few poorer people. Dig some old folks’ gardens for them. That sort of thing. You never know, you might get a taste for it.”

“Thank you, sir. And ma’am. Thank you.”

The Mage sent them back.

“Now, we will have to leave you, you two. Come and see us some time. We’d love to hear how you are getting on. Goodbye for now.”

“Thank you for everything. I think things are going to change for the better,” said Carl. “I feel it somehow.”

The Mage shook their hands and the Boffin hugged them, then they stepped, waving goodbye, back to their own space.

“Well, that was interesting,” said the Mage.

“Especially when she tried to draw you towards her. We really underestimated that space. Or rather, we overestimated our powers in a foreign space.”

The Mage waved his hands and the Boffin looked exactly like the Witch had earlier.

“Stop it!” said the Boffin. She was not pleased. “Green doesn’t suit me!”

The Mage realized his mistake and let her revert. He didn’t often make serious mistakes in their relationship, but this time he knew that he had. “Sorry, it was meant as a joke. I can see now that it wasn’t funny. Not funny at all.”

The Boffin let him hold her. She wondered how long she could pretend to be still annoyed with him. She decided not to tease him as he looked so worried. She kissed him.

“It was horrible to be powerless,” she said. “We waltzed in there, full of confidence, and then we could do nothing. We were over confident. Let’s learn from that.”

“You’re right. We were over confident. But we did have a little power. I sorted your nose out. I resisted the Witch’s pull to some extent.”

“That’s true. I managed to communicate with the kids, too. I’ll have to figure out a way to store the power, in case we find ourselves in a place where we can’t connect to the local source. A sort of battery, I guess. I think we are going to find ourselves in similar situations in the future.”

“I think so too, my dear. It seems that our roles have changed to helping youngsters like Carl and Lynn through difficult situations. I feel, however, that while we may be less powerful in other spaces, the people that we will be helping will not be restricted in the same way, since they will be natives of the other spaces.”

She leaned into him, and he enfolded her in his arms. “I trust your feelings, dear, and I agree with your reasons. But my blood ran cold when the Witch was drawing you towards her.”

“Don’t worry, my dear. You know that I will never leave you. While my body might have come to stand beside her, my heart would still have been with you. You know that.”

And she did.

A Chat with God

The Mage and the Boffin were a long way from home. They'd been visiting some friends in a distant space and had stopped off on their way back to their home space. One of the Boffin's students would probably have said that they been visiting alternative Universes, if he or she had known that the Mage and the Boffin could step between spaces.

But anyway, in the space or world or Universe where the Mage and Boffin had stopped off, a big battle was underway. To the soldiers of both sides, they were invisible. When they had first arrived, they were protected from harm, of course, but both sides could see them, and both sides naturally targeted them. So the Mage had hidden them both from view.

The Boffin plucked a bullet from the air and inspected it. "Hm, it's just a dumb projectile, a lump of metal. At least it's not an exploding bullet or a 'smart' bullet. The technology is pretty basic, then."

"Still deadly," commented the Mage. "I wonder what they are fighting about?"

A large shell landed nearby and dirt splattered against their protection.

"They're fighting about me, I expect," said a voice. "It's usually about me."

The Mage and Boffin turned. An oldish looking man with white hair and beard and long flowing robes was standing next them. He didn't seem happy.

"Hullo," said the Boffin. "Why would they be fighting about you?"

The old man looked to the west and then to the east. "Yes, they are fighting about me, or rather, about something they believe about me."

He turned to the Mage and the Boffin. "You're not from around here, are you? I figured as much when the bullets bounced off you or avoided you. I'm God, by the way."

"You're God?" said the Mage incredulously.

"Of this space, anyway." He paused thoughtfully. "Hmm, you call it a 'space', I see. Yes, I'm God. The people in this space are believers, and their belief has caused me to exist. I can see that you don't do things that way at home."

“Yes,” said the Boffin. “We, well, our people, are either more or less interested in science or more or less interested in magic. We don’t have a strong religion, but we do have some believers.”

“You’re lucky,” said God. “I actually don’t think that I existed before enough people believed strongly in me, but once I existed, I had always existed, it seems. You two are real people, so you don’t have that existential problem.”

“So what are they fighting about?”

“Apparently, according to their beliefs,” he said gesturing to the east, “I said something about the way they worship me.”

He gestured to the west. “They, on the other hand, believe something else.”

“Did you say anything about the way that people worship you?”

God snorted. “I said nothing about worship. Nothing at all. I didn’t want them to worship me. I did once ask them to respect me.”

“What did you want from them? I mean, after you started to exist.”

“Once I existed, I existed for ever. I was by myself, and well, being anthropomorphic, I got lonely and wanted people around me, so I created the big explosion that created this Universe. You call it this ‘space’, of course. Good name. It didn’t work out too well. I’m infinitely patient of course, so I didn’t mind the billions of years it took to create all the matter, and for it to condense into stars, and for life to evolve on this small planet.”

“From your face, that’s when the trouble started,” guessed the Mage.

“Yes, to create humans, I needed life to appear and for evolution to occur. That was tricky to get started but once it was going it only took a few billion years. The problem was that evolution happens because of competition. All life is founded on competition.”

“Ah, so humans evolved to be competitive,” said the Mage.

“Yes, and they insist on killing each other. Sad, isn’t it?”

“It’s much the same in our space,” said the Mage, “but I don’t think that we are nearly as aggressive as your people.”

God nodded. “Yes, I think that is because they invented religion. They invented ME.”

“But you’re God. Couldn’t you do something?”

God nodded again. “What do you do when humans start to wage a war in your space?”

“Well, we generally don’t interfere. If we do, it usually makes things worse. Oh, I see!”

“Exactly. I tried many times to stop the wars, and every time I made things worse. One time I took one of them aside and said to him ‘Look, I don’t like all this killing. Please tell everyone to stop it.’ He said ‘Lord, I’ll carve it on some stones and then everyone can see your commands and act on them.’ I said ‘Don’t bother, here they are.’ He went down the mountain with the stones, very happy with himself.”

“What went wrong?”

“Well, a couple of things. I’d added a couple of other instructions, things about loving your mother and father, and not desiring your neighbours smart house and car and that sort of thing and one about listening to me, rather than all the false gods that were around at the time. Things that I thought would be useful to remember. I’d written the commands in the language and the idiom that they used at the time. But I should have kept it simple. Just a ban on all the killing. It just confused them.”

“What else went wrong?”

“Well, I’ll go into that, but shall we get away from all this killing?”

God waved his hand, and they were standing on the front porch of a pleasant house with a view over fields and meadows, down to a wide meandering river.

“Please sit down. I’ll make some tea.” God potted off. He was back in a minute or two with a tray, with teapot, cups and two plates of biscuits.

“You know, for some reason, no one thought of a possible Mrs God,” he said. “So, unless I actually manifest myself to a human, I’m always alone.” He sighed.

“So what happened about the stones?” asked the Boffin, dipping her biscuit in her tea.

“Well, the chap I chose decided that having the stones meant that his people were ‘chosen by God’, and that meant that everyone else was not chosen and could be killed. In fact, he and others reasoned, it was his duty to kill anyone who was not one of his people. This was reinforced by another command, which was to have no other gods but me. I’d actually meant that they should not listen to the prophets of other gods, but I couldn’t phrase it that way in the language that they used. So the killing went on.”

“That must have been discouraging,” commented the Boffin.

“Yes, it was. I was so discouraged that at one time I created a flood and drowned them all. That was tricky as some lived up mountains and I didn’t want to completely flood everywhere, and also I had to preserve all the animals and plants. The animals hadn’t caused the wars, of course. And the idea of killing everyone to stop them killing each other was not exactly logical either, was it? I think I was a little crazy at the time.”

“But there are people now, so did you recreate them?”

“No, I foolishly picked one man who I thought was better than all the rest, and told him to build a boat to save himself and his family. He floated around for a while, then ended up on a mountain. The floods drained away and I put all the animals and plants back. You wouldn’t believe the silly stories that this incident gave rise to! In one, all the animals were carried in the boat, with the humans! As if that were possible. But it wasn’t long before the killing resumed.”

“This is a nice place you have here, God,” said the Boffin. She was trying to stop God from becoming too depressed.

“Thank you. I spend a lot of time here, but it is lonely. Do you not have wars back in your space, Boffin?”

“Well, yes. For that matter, I don’t think that we’ve seen a human space that doesn’t have war. Humans seem to like them. You could be right that it stems from evolution and that competitiveness is built in to humans.”

“Do you not have conflict between science and magic? It seems to me that having both science and magic in a space would lead to fighting.”

“We do have competition, it’s true, and we did have one huge war between science and magic, but that ended when one man absorbed all the power of science and magic into himself by accident and ended the war. He then passed the focus of science to me and the focus of magic to the Mage. We were both sympathetic to the other’s field of expertise already, and we fell in love and were married. After that, there was still competition, but it is mostly just a friendly rivalry.”

God nodded. “I wish something like that had happened in this space. I notice, though, that you both have traits from the other’s field. You, my dear Boffin, are a mother figure, I think, and that leans to the magic side. The Mage is a father figure, and that leans to the science side.”

The Boffin was startled. “Well, I never thought of it that way,” she said. “It could be true.”

She looked at the Mage. “What do you think, dear?”

“Well, God may be right. We’ve never worried too much about keeping the roles and the foci separate. We often borrow techniques from each other and respect each other’s field, and the crossover in our traits that God mentioned probably helps.”

“Anyway, God, I suppose that you tried again, to stop people killing one another?”

“Oh yes, several times. Many times! I had some success when I manifested myself, and taught a group of people to love one another and restrain their natural aggression.”

God took on the appearance of a younger man. “But I’d upset the authorities, and they killed me rather gruesomely, or rather they killed the body that I had at the time. Even for me it was difficult to come back from that and it took a few days until I was able to return. This shocked and horrified my followers, so I had to leave them. The stories that resulted from that were strange. People rationalized what they saw, and fitted it into their view of the world.”

He paused. “Well, the movement took off, and became a religion which spread widely. It did seem to tone down the killing and the wars just a bit. People did consider the feelings of other people more. I was quite pleased, at first, but the wars started again soon enough.”

The Mage said “When we were just starting out we tried to stop all the wars. On one occasion we took all the Kings and Queens and put them in a space where they could harm no one, and told them to make peace. Eventually they did, but when we sent them back, one King treacherously attacked and took over all the other kingdoms. We managed to stop him after a while, but we learned a valuable lesson from that. We only try to influence things and interfere directly as little as possible.”

God laughed. “Well, maybe I’m a slow learner. I’ve tried again a few times since but it always ended badly. But lately, like you, I’ve just been a spectator.”

“So, what were those two armies fighting about?”

“Well, both sides believe in me, and both are offshoots of the religion I talked about before. One lot believe that their leader is an avatar of me, and that everything he says is the literal truth. It’s not true of course. The other lot don’t believe in this doctrine of infallibility, and they loathe the rituals that their enemies love. So they are trying to persuade each other with bullets and bombs! Madness!”

The Mage asked “Are you not interfering in this war, then?”

God snorted. “No, I’ve not interfered for a thousand or so years. I feel so sorry for those who suffer through these wars, though, that I’ve a space that I send them to, where everything is idyllic. It makes me feel a little better.”

“You don’t think that you need a bit of balance do you, God? What about the environment? What part of you worries about that? Is there a part of you that encompasses the mother figure?” asked the Mage.

“The environment? I’m always trying to persuade them to save some species or another! As for the ‘mother figure’ thing, maybe you are right, and maybe I do need some balance. Over the millennia and the millions of years I’ve thought about that, and meeting you two I can see that there are advantages. A shared burden. Someone to talk to. A different point of view.”

“Then there're the kids,” said the Mage.

“Kids!” said God. “Oh, yes, the kids!” He was lost in his own thoughts for a while.

“Well,” said the Mage, “I would say that you possibly do need balance. Your approach is definitely paternal, as is mine, and there seems to be little corresponding maternal influence, like the Boffin provides in our space. It may improve things to have that influence. Most spaces that we have visited have a maternal and a paternal influence, or an equivalent. In some spaces, the males look after the offspring and the females do the providing, but the balance is there.”

“Was there never any maternal influence in this space?” asked the Boffin.

God cast his mind back. “Well in the early days, there was a mother Goddess, but as rational thinking replaced mysticism she sort of faded away. My followers have always been aggressive, as you saw on that battlefield, and, they claim, favour a rational approach, which may have contributed to her eclipse. I wonder what happened to her? I’ve always been suspicious of magic and superstition, but you, my dear Boffin are able to accept it alongside your science? Maybe I’m wrong.”

The Boffin replied “Of course. It helps to remember that you use intuition all the time. You expect the sun to come up every morning, and you are always right. Oh, you can justify your intuition by wrapping science around it and talk about the rotation of the earth and stuff like that, but inevitably, eventually, those equations will be inadequate and the sun will not rise. But until that day, your intuition will prove to be correct. You don’t even think about it. Long before science existed people expected the sun to rise every morning, and it did! Your intuition is magical, not scientific.”

She looked at her husband and smiled. “Besides, magic works, doesn’t it, my love?” she said.

She kissed her hand and blew. A brilliant ball of light flew through the air to the Mage and touched his lips. He caught the ball of light on his hand, blew it and the ball of light flew back to the Boffin.

God mused a bit. “But surely there is science behind that phenomenon?” he asked.

“Sure,” said the Boffin, “but it is still magical, isn’t it?”

The Mage and the Boffin bade God goodbye and strolled down his drive. It would be rude to vanish right off his doorstep.

As they reached the road a woman turned into the gateway. An attractive woman, thought the Boffin. She was slightly more curvy than the Boffin's slim build, and her skin gleamed darker than the Boffin's fairly dark skin. She wore a colourful wrap around dress that caused the Boffin to break one of God's commandments, the one about coveting, and her long, dark, curly hair was studded with small white flowers. She had bracelets on her wrists and anklets around her ankles. Her feet were bare. Around her neck was a necklace supporting a single large pearl. She smiled and her smile lit up the space, or the world, or the Universe. The Boffin instantly liked her.

"Is he in?" asked the woman.

The Boffin stepped forward and hugged her. "Yes, he's in. And I think he's ready."

"It's about time," laughed the woman. "It's been thousands of years. Millions. Thank you."

"For what?" asked the Mage. "Oh, you think we helped by being a couple?"

"Don't mind him, he can be a bit slow at times," said the Boffin.

The woman laughed and started off up the drive. She swayed in a way that the Boffin wished she could copy.

"Good luck," called the Boffin.

"Thank you," responded the woman.

The Mage swept the Boffin into his arms and kissed her thoroughly. She linked her fingers behind his neck.

"You don't have to prove anything, my love," she said. "She's a very attractive woman, the Goddess, but I know my man. It's nice of you, though. Now let's go home."

The Mage laughed. "It wasn't that. It was the thought of millennia without you, my dear. But it's nice of you, though!" he said teasingly.

He kissed her again, then slipped his arm around her waist, and she did the same, and they took the step that took them home.

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 and other reptiles 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, 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 as it came 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 short limbs ended in webbed feet, for swimming, with four dragon claws around the edge. Its body was narrow and tall, like a fish, and it had a strong, flat eel-like tail. 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, his webbed feet, and his strong tail 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 spent time as, 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 along 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 jaws. 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 the halo of the dragon space sun. Their guide entered a lagoon and

swam up to the beach and 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 tail, 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. Mmm! 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. There were also fish darting 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 headed on up the cliff. As they got higher the seaweeds became denser, 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 in coral. 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 and swam 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 the attendant dragon shaded the rest of the eggs with her body and fins.

“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 sort of right. We’re not on the Terra that we know. We’re on a version of it though. It exists alongside our Terra. My husband and I call these different places ‘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 called 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 the fish 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 rifts that are 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 or find 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, and, 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.

Water, As Far As the Eye Can See

The Mage was sitting in the swing seat on the veranda of the cottage, reading a book. The Boffin was off giving a keynote speech at a conference in a fairly distant space, and he was missing her. He always did, and she told him that when they were apart she missed him too. He reflected that the person who was away was generally too busy and had less spare time to miss the other, but there was always, at least in his case, and he assumed the Boffin's case, an underlying ache, an unease.

He read the same paragraph again, and it still didn't make sense. He sighed and put his book down and stared into the distance. Then he dropped his line of sight. A small boy was looking at him. He was wearing a pair of pyjamas and a solemn expression, and was carrying a teddy bear. He had bare feet and black curly hair in a halo around his head. His skin was as dark as ebony, darker even than the Boffin's. He looked familiar to the Mage.

"Hullo," he said. "You remind me of someone I know. Someone called Gremlin."

The boy smiled. "She's me Gran."

"Your Gran? Has it been that long?"

The Mage was momentarily taken aback. But, he reflected that, from the very beginning, it had been thousands of years.

"What's your name?" he asked.

"Mouse."

"Mouse? What sort of name is 'Mouse'? What's your real name?"

Mouse dug around in his nostril. "Richard."

"OK, Richard. Did anyone ever tell you not to pick your nose?"

Mouse grinned. "Yeah!"

"Does your Mum know you are here?" said the Mage. He ran through a mental list of Gremlin's children. Lynne? No, she had all girls. Peter? He had a boy, but he hadn't called him Richard. Georgina, otherwise known as George? Yes! She'd had a boy and called him Richard! Of course. "Mouse" must be a recently acquired nickname.

"Nah, she thinks I'm in bed."

Well, yes, she lived part way round the world. That would be right.

“What are you doing here, Mouse. Why did you visit me?” Without setting off any alarms, he realized.

“Dunno. Are you sad? About something?”

“Sort of.”

Mouse climbed up on his lap. “Great Gran isn’t here,” he stated.

“Ah, yes. She’s due back soon.”

“She’s stuck,” said Mouse.

“Stuck?” The Mage felt a thrill of worry.

“Yeah. There’s water everywhere,” said Mouse. “Water everywhere!”

“OK kid, Richard, Mouse, here’s what we do. We go and see Mum, and we make sure you are in bed, asleep, where you should be.”

Mouse thought about it. “OK,” he said.

The Mage stepped to George’s house, to find that George hadn’t even realized that Mouse had gone.

“I didn’t know that he knew how to step!” she said. “Sorry, Grandpa.”

“Don’t worry. He says Gran is stuck. Now that worries me!”

“She’s over there,” Mouse said, waving.

“Hmm.” The Mage got the general direction. He’d have to search.

The Boffin choked up water. What the.... She was floating in water, sea water by the taste, and could see nothing except waves in every direction. She had no idea how she came to be floating in the middle of an ocean. She couldn’t remember anything before she was here, and her head ached.

Suddenly a rope splashed into the water in front of her, and she instinctively grabbed it. Someone hauled on the rope, and she was pulled to the side of a ship, struggling to keep her head out of water. There was a rope ladder and strong hands helped her up the side.

She lay on the deck gasping, spitting up water. She put her hand to her head and it came away bloody.

“That’s quite a crack you got from our boom. Where in heck and hell did you come from?” said a voice.

She looked up at a ring of concerned faces. “What? Where am I?”

“You’re on the trader ‘New Moon Rising’. Hold still while Doc patches up the cut.”

A whiskery face appeared and a hand touched her head, and she did as requested and kept still.

“Hm,” said Doc. “Not big enough for stitches. A pressure pad should do it.”

He proceeded to bandage her head.

“You did well to keep so still. What’s your name, girl?”

The Boffin realized that he was talking to her. She was confused as she knew somehow that she’d not been called “girl” for a long time. She started to panic as she couldn’t even remember her name. She couldn’t remember anything! Then a passing thought provided her with a name.

“I think my name is ‘Eve’,” she said tentatively.

“Hmph!” said the first voice, obviously a figure of authority. “If you’re named for the Goddess, you should be good luck. Welcome aboard, Eve.”

The Boffin looked up into a woman’s weathered face. She had shrewd blue eyes, and hair bleached white by the sun.

“Are you the Captain?” she asked.

“Yep, Cap’n Snow is my name. This is my motley crew, except for Greg. He’s on the wheel. You know Doc, of course. This is Sally.”

Sally gave a huge sneeze. The Captain rolled her eyes. “She’s allergic to everything, we think. The one hiding behind the rest is Basil. He’s a bit shy. Then there’s Doug. We think his mother dropped him on his head when he was little. He’s not the brightest of the bunch.”

Doug just giggled nervously.

“Then there’s Harry, and finally Steve. Where’s Steve? STEVE! GET OUT HERE WHEREVER YOU ARE!!”

“Just having a little snooze, Cap’n. Nothing much is happening,” said Steve, coming forward. He’d been sleeping on a pile of ropes and

canvas.

The Captain whacked him gently on the back of the head.

“You’re supposed to tidy and clean the decks when you have time! Nothing much is happening he says. We have Eve here attacking our boom with her head in open ocean and you say nothing much is happening! Right back to your stations everyone. Basil, go and stand watch with Greg. We don’t want to hit anything else. I’m going to talk to Eve in my cabin.”

Snow helped the Boffin down to her cabin. The Captain’s cabin was tiny, but did hold a chair and desk. Snow indicated to the Boffin that she should sit on the bed, and she took the chair.

“How do you feel, Eve. You had a hefty whack on the head.”

“Oh, much better, Cap’n. My thoughts are woolly and my head aches, and I can’t remember anything, but apart from that I feel OK.”

The Captain snorted at that. “I didn’t want to say anything in front of the crew, but I saw you appear in mid-air and crack into our boom as we went about. What this all about, Eve?”

The Boffin shook her head. “I don’t know. I can’t remember a thing before I ended up in the sea. How far are we from land?”

“Land? Well, there’s a word that I haven’t heard in a long time. Do you mean the Frozen Poles? There is no ‘land’ and there hasn’t been for thousands of years. What do you mean?”

“I have to get back to my hus.... Wait! I have a husband.”

An intense longing came over her, and tears flowed readily.

“You have a husband? What is his name?”

The Boffin searched around in the cotton wool clouds that were her thoughts. “Adam. I think his name is Adam.”

“Glory be,” said Snow. “She’s named for the Goddess and her husband is named for the God. She talks about ‘land’. There’s something odd going on here. Look, Eve, I wouldn’t mention this to anyone else, OK? There’s Goddess followers and God followers that would find that blasphemous. OK.”

“Sure, Cap’n. I’m not even sure of my own name at the moment. But I do know I have a husband and I need to get back to him!”

Snow sighed. “Don’t we all. Anyway, I’ll put you in with Sally. She’s in Number Two’s cabin, but we don’t have a Number Two. I don’t think that she will mind. Do you mind helping out? It’ll be better than just sitting around. Do you know anything about being on a ship?”

The Boffin said “I don’t know. I can learn.”

Snow inspected her hands. “Soft,” was her verdict, with a sigh.

Sally didn’t mind at all. In fact, she loved the idea. “Someone to talk to at last! Oh, the boys are OK but I can’t talk girl talk with them and the Captain is the Captain.”

The Boffin liked Sally. She was a blonde girl, blue-eyed, and friendly, and the Boffin soon got used to her sneezes. The Boffin was struck by a thought. “Do you have a mirror, Sally?”

She looked at the face in the mirror and it rang no bells. She saw a pretty dark skinned girl with long dark hair and deep brown eyes.

“Oh! I don’t recognize my own face.” she said, tears rising to her eyes. “What if don’t recognize my husband when I see him?”

“Unlikely,” said Sally. “It was the first thing that you remembered, you said. That you had a husband. So I’m guessing that you will know him immediately when you see him. I’ll pay you ten credits if I’m wrong.”

“Thanks, Sally. I hope so. I really hope you are right.”

At the evening meal, Captain Snow announced that she would be juggling the watches and including the Boffin.

“We don’t think Eve has any experience on a ship, so you guys will have to look out for her. Also, she’s had a bad crack on the head and while Doc says she’s OK, she may feel the effects for a while. She strikes me as a quick learner, but she’s not got the muscles yet and her hands are soft. Sorry, Eve, but it’s true.”

The Boffin nodded. “Yes, Cap’n. Thank you.”

“We’re less than two weeks behind Birmingham, and when catch them up, we’ll see if anyone knows anything about her. OK, everyone. Thank you.”

The Mage knew where the Boffin had given her speech, and he stepped there first. He located some people that she had talked to, and so far as

they knew she was planning to go straight home. He found the colleague who had invited her.

“No,” he said, “She was keen to get home, she said. She always is, if she comes alone. We went to a safe place and she stepped. Sorry. Let me know if I can help.”

“Thanks. I’ll call if I think you can help, but first I’m going back home again. She might have arrived back by now.”

He was just about to step back home when he caught a glimpse of movement out of the corner of his eye.

“Mouse! Are you following me!”

Mouse giggled.

“She’s over there!” said Mouse pointing.

“I know, Mouse. I know. Now, let’s go home.” The Mage held the small boy’s hand and stepped back to his home space. George had just realized that he was missing and was about to raise the alarm.

“Oh, thank goodness! You naughty boy!” She swept him up into her arms, but Mouse didn’t seem concerned.

“Great Gran is stuck. She’s over there.” He pointed.

“Yes, dear,” said the Mage. “Look, George, I’d better make it so that he can’t step for a while. When he’s bigger, we’ll have to teach him about the risks and how to avoid them. Is that OK.”

“Sure,” said George. “I think that I could find him, but I’d rather he wasn’t roaming the spaces like this.”

The Mage placed a charm round Mouse’s neck, and backed it up with a tight spell. Mouse didn’t take any notice. The Mage stepped home and considered his options. He was getting worried and needed help. He sent out some messages across the spaces and figuratively chewed his finger nails.

The Boffin was paired with Doc for her first watch. Doc was the whiskery old gentleman who had patched her up, and it seemed that anything vaguely scientific or technical was considered his domain. Doc told her that he was once a medic and was happy dealing with most

medical matters, but he was completely lost on mechanical and electronic things.

“Look at this,” he said with disgust. “Our water purifier. It takes in sea water and puts out fresh water. It only works when it feels like it, and we have to catch rain water and buy barrels of fresh water when we catch up with places.”

“Can I look?” said the Boffin. Doc indicated that she could.

She took the cover off and started tracing the flow of water through the device. She took the filters out and cleaned them. Some had seaweed growing on them.

“Doc, does anyone service this thing? I think that the filters should be cleaned regularly.”

Doc shook his head. “No one knows anything about it. When the captain joined us, she said she’d get someone to look at it, but we’ve been too busy.”

The Boffin looked at the pulley on the pump which was connected by a belt to the motor.

“That pulley is loose. Do you have a spanner, Doc?”

She tightened it up and spun the pulley.

“The belt is slipping. Let me tighten that too.”

She tightened the belt, then fired up the electric motor, and the device started whirring and water started to pour through the exhaust pipe and back into the sea. Nothing came out of the fresh water pipe.

“Hmm. I wonder if the osmosis pack is OK.”

She stopped the machine and unscrewed the main osmosis cylinder. She pulled out the element and it was completely clogged.

“Wow! It’s a wonder you got anything at all out of this.”

She rinsed it off in salt water, then with fresh water, getting rid of all the grey sludge.

“Right, that might work, but it really needs a new osmosis pack. That’s probably the original, by the look of it. They should be changed every year at least. Let’s try it.”

She switched it on and fresh water started to appear, drip by drip, out of the fresh water pipe. Eventually a small trickle flowed from the pipe into the tank. She replaced the cover.

Doc looked at her. "That's amazing. Were you a purifier technician, then, Eve?"

She considered. "I still can't remember anything, Doc. Not even my name, for sure. I think that I worked in science or engineering?"

Doc was surprised. "But those things are the God's things and you have the Goddess' name! Some people would be angry about that."

"What is it about the God and the Goddess? Are they religions or something?"

Doc shook his head. "You really don't know? Everyone belongs to the God or the Goddess. The God is the rational, the scientific, and the Goddess, is the irrational, the emotions and so on. God followers are rational. Goddess followers are emotional and impulsive."

"But surely, everyone has a bit of each in them? Surely?"

"Yes, but you are supposed to try to be one or the other. You don't seem to care, and that would upset some people."

The Boffin nodded. "The Captain warned me. But where I come from people don't worry too much about it. 'Where I come from!' I remember! I don't come from here, but I don't know where I come from or how I got here."

Doc nodded. "I'm aligned to the God, and supposed to be logical. I'd worked that out! But come on, cheer up. Let's go and tell the Captain that we've fixed the water purifier. And that you are aligned to the God too. It will be best if you tell that lie, because I think that you can fake that more easily than an alignment to the Goddess. If it is a lie. Your name is just a mistake made when you were born. There are some people who have been given wrongly aligned names."

Doc and the Boffin found the Captain in her cabin. She listened to Doc's explanation of how the water purifier was fixed, and listened to Doc's "explanation" of how the Boffin "remembered" that she was aligned to the God.

"That's great news," she said, obviously realizing that Doc was stretching the truth a little. "How is the memory, Eve?"

“Not much better, Cap’n,” She decided not to mention that, as Doc suspected, she came from “somewhere else”. She didn’t know what the Captain thought, but guessed she probably suspected it too.

The next time the Boffin was on watch she was with Greg. It was a night watch, and it seemed to consist mainly of sitting wrapped in canvas to keep the warmth in, while listening to Greg, who was on the wheel, complaining about pretty much everything. Nothing appeared out to sea, except a few dolphins. The Boffin volunteered every couple of hours to make Greg hot tea with three teaspoons of sugar in it. Towards the end of the watch, though, Greg stopped complaining long enough to tie up the wheel for a bit and show the Boffin a few knots and how to coil and handle ropes.

Responses to the Mage inquiries began to come in. They made for depressingly similar reading. It was as if they were all stamped from the same template. “Nice to hear from you again, sorry to hear about your problems. No, we’ve seen no sign of the Boffin in our space.” He reflected that if she had arrived in one of his contacts’ spaces, she would have immediately made herself known if she possibly could.

He was forced to conclude, Boffin like, that either she had not arrived in their spaces, or, for some reason, she couldn’t get in touch with his contacts. This last possibility made his blood run cold.

Then one of his contacts did respond that he had heard reports of a woman using powers either of science or magic in the provinces of his space. She was causing a bit of a stir, apparently. While the bit about “causing a bit of a stir” didn’t sound like the Boffin, who always tried to keep a low profile in an unknown space, the Mage was hopeful.

So he visited the space and together with Michael, his contact and the focus of science in the space, he went out to the provinces to check. Michael’s wife, Sarah, the focus of magic in the space, stayed behind.

“She’s somewhere around here,” said Michael, as they stepped in. “She seems to be recruiting an army, but I’m not sure what her plans are beyond that.”

“Sounds typical of an untutored person with some powers. She came from somewhere else, though?”

“That’s what they said. It’s hard to know what that means. Let’s go into the village and see what is going on.”

As they reached the village, people were coming and going from the inn, and they guessed that the woman was probably in there. There were no guards on the door, so they just walked in. The Mage knew immediately that the woman was not the Boffin and his heart sank. However, since they were here, they had a job to do.

The woman was blonde and shapely, and oozed charisma. “Hullo boys, have you come to join the movement?” she asked.

“Not exactly,” said the Mage, and he looked deep into her eyes.

Now, charisma is only one part of the power of a magician, and the Mage had charisma to spare, and he also had other powers.

The woman lost some of her confidence. “Who are you?” she asked. She tried a few simple charms and spells, but they just bounced off the Mage.

Michael spoke up. “We’ve come to see who was causing all this fuss. So far, no one has been hurt, but the way it’s been going, it wouldn’t be long.”

The woman tried to step, but Michael had closed off that exit route, and her shoulders slumped.

“I just wanted to get away! It was so horrible where I was. I don’t know how I got here, and the people here would do anything I asked. It was so easy!”

Michael looked at the Mage who nodded. “What she says seems true, Michael. Sarah can help her, and I think that she will be a real asset once she’s had some training,” said the Mage.

“Well, we’ll have to ask you to come with us. Don’t worry, nothing bad will happen to you, I promise! I’m just going to introduce you to my wife,” said Michael.

So they took the woman back with them, and Sarah coaxed the story out of her.

“It seems it was pretty bad where she came from, especially for women. She stepped away from it without knowing what she did, and then found that her natural powers could affect the people here,” said

Sarah to Michael and the Mage. “I wonder where it was? I wonder if we can help.”

“If you decide to help, please be careful,” said the Mage. “But anyway, I have to leave you. I have to look for my wife. It’s been more than a week, and I’m no further forward.”

Sarah kissed him and sent him on his way. “Good luck...”

The Mage stepped and she continued “... I hope you find her.”

“Do you think he will find her?” asked Michael.

Sarah pulled out an orb on a chain, which was a small scrying ball, and consulted it. “Yes, I believe he will. Funny. There’s a mouse involved.”

Midway through the second week they caught up with Birmingham. The Boffin’s hands were tougher now from all the rope work and other shipboard duties, but she still had the softest hands in the crew. She’d worked with them all eventually. From Doug, who was sweet, but not very bright, to Basil who could hardly look at her without blushing, to the ever cheerful Harry, and the others already mentioned. She fitted into the crew as if she’d been with them for years. She rapidly became the “fix-it” person, the one who fixed the broken mechanical and electrical devices on the ship.

She was winched up the mast when the mechanism to raise and lower the sails failed and fixed it. With Doug, she went up again to lower a jib which the Captain decided to bring down because it was damaged, and she wanted to repair it before they got hit by “weather”. Then she watched as Harry and Basil raised the repaired jib back into position.

The day before they caught up with Birmingham, Captain Snow called her in.

“Eve, we reach Birmingham tomorrow and I have to hand a copy of my logs to the authorities. I’ve not lied in my logs, as that would be immoral as well as illegal. So what the logs say is that we struck an object, and then pulled you out of the water. You had lost your memory and couldn’t explain how you got there. That’s the truth as far as it goes. You think that you remembered that your name was ‘Eve’ although you remembered later being aligned to the God. You also remembered that

you were married. I've not written the name you told me for your husband down anywhere. Does that about cover it?"

"Yes, Cap'n. Thank you. I've not remembered anything else, I promise you." She didn't mention vague recollections of sons and daughters and grandchildren. They wouldn't believe she was old enough. She didn't believe she was old enough! She had vague ideas of places with land, not endless seas. Dragons, kings and queens, princes and princesses filled her dreams. And a cottage! A lot of yearning accompanied her dreams of that cottage. How much of it, she wondered, had any truth at all in it? How much of it was mere dreams?

"Hmm, Sally says that you have been crying out in your sleep to someone. No names. Just 'my dear' and 'my darling'."

The Boffin did not respond.

Captain Snow looked at her. "When we reach Birmingham, people will ask questions. Keep it simple. 'I don't remember' is the best answer to everything."

The Boffin nodded. "Thanks, Cap'n. You're so good to this castaway! I can't thank you enough."

"You chose my ship to collide with. You're my responsibility, and besides, I like you. Now, we will be at Birmingham for a week, and then we sail for Carlisle, which is currently north of here. If you want, you can sail with us. You've fitted in well. Your lack of papers is no problem, as fully half of my crew have no papers and all the other ships are pretty much the same. What do you say?"

"Thank you, Cap'n. I'd like to join you, I think, but if I find out how I came to be lost in the ocean, I might not be able to. My husband..."

She broke down.

Captain Snow nodded. "I understand," she said. "Look, why don't you come and stay with me and my husband? You won't have digs on Birmingham, and now Sally has moved out we have a spare room."

"Sally?"

"Yes, she's my daughter. Did no one tell you?" Captain Snow laughed. "I guess it didn't occur to them to mention it."

They caught sight of Birmingham early the next day and the sight of it shocked her. Now she understood the references to “catching up” to Birmingham. It was a floating island, several miles across. As they approached it rotated slowly in whatever ocean current it was following.

The Boffin happened to be on watch with Doc on the wheel when she first saw it, and all the others were busy with their own tasks. The Captain was standing behind the Boffin and Doc, watching the activity and occasionally calling out orders.

The Captain saw the Boffin’s shock. “You’ve never seen an island before, have you? You really must be from somewhere else.”

Only Doc could hear her, and he glanced back at the Captain.

“Birmingham. Currently one of the Britannia Islands. Population, around five thousand. Currently rotating once every sixteen hours or so, heading north at approximately three knots. Mostly aligned to the God, but about one in five aligned to the Goddess. Last time we were home, there were one hundred and twenty-five coconut trees, around eighty softwoods, and just over thirty hardwoods. Salmon farming, sea rice, a few tea bushes and one very pampered coffee bean tree. That’s about it, isn’t it, Cap’n?”

“You forgot the cows. Thirty seven when we were home last and one bull, Ferdy. Oh, and countless chickens.” Doc nodded.

“Uh, are you all from Birmingham,” asked the Boffin, tentatively.

“Yes, home port and birthplace of us all.” The Captain oozed pride.

They sailed around the edge of the island and docked at the leading edge.

“Why is it always the leading edge? Why is never the trailing edge,” grumbled Greg.

“Just so you have something to complain about, Greg,” said the ever cheerful Harry.

They tied up a rocking wharf, which flexed as each wave passed it. The crew disembarked and all called their goodbyes and best wishes to the Boffin. They didn’t know if they’d see her again.

“See ya, Eve, you’ll make a good sailor some day,” said Steve as he left.

Captain Snow and the Boffin walked down the wharf to the Harbourmaster's office, and the Boffin waited outside. She saw that the flexible wharf structures ended just after the office, and from then on the ground looked like regular ground. It was hard to tell if it was moving or not, as she herself was rising and falling with the waves.

Captain Snow emerged from the office, looking a little concerned.

"They want to see you tomorrow," she said. "At the Town Hall. It should be OK, I think. By the way, I'm 'Snow' when we are ashore. Not 'Captain'."

They walked off the moving wharf structures and onto the "ground" of the island. The Boffin thought that she could feel some movement, but of course the wavelength of the waves would be longer and the frequency lower. Then she wondered where that knowledge came from.

Snow confidently found her way through a maze of little alleyways overhung by tall buildings. To the Boffin everything looked to be constructed on a small scale, but obviously space was in short supply on the island. Snow ducked around a chicken coop and opened a narrow door.

"Chris! Chris, I'd like you to meet someone!" she called.

A tall dark haired man of the same age as Snow came forward and kissed Snow thoroughly before turning to the Boffin. The Boffin felt a pang of anguish, but then felt that her husband was looking for her as hard as he could. He must be! She just knew it!

Chris shook her hand. "So this is the mysterious stranger. Welcome, Eve. There're all sorts of rumours going around about you."

He looked at Snow. "Is she staying with us? I guessed that she would be, so I made up Sally's bed."

"Is there anything useful going around, though, dear? Has anyone got any idea where she comes from?"

Chris laughed. "Well, half of the rumours say she's a spy from the Amerigo/Mexico islands, and the other half reckon she's from Nippon, so no, there's nothing useful going around."

"Fix me a beer, please, Chris. I'll show Eve Sally's room. Do you want a beer, Eve?"

“Oh, yes please.” She’d never seen Snow drink before. Maybe she avoided it when she was on her ship.

The Mage was in his study when George came round, in a bit of a state.

“Mouse has disappeared, Grandpa. I’d put him in his room for a sleep, but when I checked he’d gone.”

“He’s nowhere around your place, hiding, is he?”

“No, I looked. There was a charm on the door to stop him opening it, and that wasn’t sprung. Besides....”

“Besides?”

“Besides, my intuition tells me that he is not in this space.”

“Oh. How on earth did he escape my spells and charms? He’s a clever little thing, isn’t he? Has he still got his charm necklace?”

“Yes, I think so.”

The Mage nodded. “So, he shouldn’t be in any immediate danger, and we should be able to trace him.”

He went into the Boffin’s laboratory, and switched on her computer. He could have spun up a tracing spell, but this was quicker. Besides, he was missing her so much, and using her computer seemed to help. George’s intuition kicked in again.

“How’s the search for Gran going?”

“Well enough. I’ll get there in the end, but I don’t understand why she hasn’t activated her pendant. She can’t lose it, because of the charm, but she hasn’t pressed it. It’s strange. Her pendant is different from Mouse’s of course and I can’t trace it directly, but if she’d only press it I be able to locate her in seconds. As it is, I have to visit spaces and check manually and that is tedious.”

The Mage thought of her lying injured somewhere, but brushed that thought aside and typed into the Boffin’s computer. Now, if he remembered correctly.... Ah, yes, that was it. If he just adjusted this....

A type of map appeared on the Boffin’s screen. The Mage dialled it back to three dimensions, but not the usual three dimensions, and two lobes appeared.

“Which one, George?”

She pointed to the top one. George’s intuition was strong.

“Right. I guess you are coming? We might have to do some trial and error, but we can get close in one step.”

They held hands and stepped.

The Boffin sat on a bench outside the Town Hall, waiting for Snow. She’d reported to the Town Hall as requested, but they didn’t seem to know what to do with her. Obviously everyone agreed she was a problem, but everyone also seemed to be of the opinion that she was someone else’s problem, not theirs. Eventually the local equivalent of a policeman, the Watch Commander, interviewed her and took a statement. He didn’t seem too worried by her sudden appearance, and eventually he let her go, after noting down that she was staying with Snow.

A little boy appeared in front of her. She frowned. He looked very familiar to her.

“Who are you?” she asked. “Do I know you?”

“I’m Mouse and you’re my Great Gran.”

A number of closed doors in her mind burst open. Mouse, who was Richard, led to George. George led to Gremlin and Gremlin led to the Mage. She burst into tears. Not all the doors had sprung open, but Mouse had opened many of them. She hugged Mouse, who was a little bewildered.

“Is he yours?” said a voice.

It was one the stall holders from the tiny square in front of the Town Hall. He seemed mildly annoyed.

“Because if he is, he took a pie from my stall. I don’t know how he did it, because I was watching him the whole time.”

The evidence was on Mouse’s face.

“Oh, I’ll pay. Mouse, you shouldn’t take pies. Say sorry to the man.”

“Sorry,” said Mouse, looking worried.

She paid the stallholder, and he thanked her and strolled off. He had kids of his own so wasn’t too worried about the theft.

“Mouse, how did you get here?” She still hadn’t figured out where “here” was, let alone “there”.

“I sort of just came.” He wasn’t interested. “Can you show me a story?”

“Show you a story? How, Mouse?”

Mouse just pointed at her pendant. Another door opened in her mind.

“Of course. Oh, I’d forgotten about that!”

Snow came back at that point.

“Who’s this?” she asked.

“Oh, Snow, he’s a relative of mine, called Mouse. He’s unlocked some closed doors in my mind. I’ve remembered so many things. Can we go home? I’ll tell you everything I can remember.”

Snow hurried them back home, and Chris gave Mouse a biscuit to distract him.

“Now tell me!” said Snow.

“Well, Mouse is my great-grandson.”

“What! You are not old enough!” The Boffin looked to be in her early thirties.

“Mouse’s Mum is Georgina, known as George. George’s Mum is Susan, known as Gremlin, who is my daughter-in-law. I know I look far too young.”

“Who are you?” said Snow, puzzled. “You’re not the Goddess in disguise, are you?” She was only half joking.

“Me? I’m your crewmember, Eve! The one with no memory. The one you rescued. I’m just another human. I’ll explain later, Snow, when I’ve got it all back, because I don’t remember everything yet. I do know that I don’t belong here, and I still don’t know what ‘here’ means. I do remember how to call my husband. I just have to press this pendant, which I’ve had all the time. But I don’t know what will happen when I press it. I still can’t remember!”

“Go ahead. Press it. What’s the worst that could happen? The seas could dry up and the fish could walk on dry land! Seriously, Eve, call your husband. I want to see if he looks like a great-grandfather.”

The Boffin pressed her pendant, and nothing much happened except that she was suddenly holding her favourite device, for the first time in a couple of weeks. She looked at it and more doors opened in her mind. She had a bit of a headache, but her mind was almost back to normal.

“Oh my. I remember! Snow, Chris, my husband may appear out of nowhere. Think of it as a conjuring trick if it helps.”

The Mage and George were sifting through the spaces. They'd stepped out to the space corresponding to the middle of the lobe, and Mouse wasn't there, which was what they really expected. They were closer to him, of course, but they didn't know how much closer. Then they had stepped half-way in the direction that Mouse was. They repeated this, halving the distance each time. Sometimes they had to step forward, sometimes they had to step back. It was a binary search, the Mage thought. A scientific, well, mathematical, method well suited to finding Mouse, wherever he was. The Boffin would be proud of him.

The problem was that they had an infinite number of spaces to search, but the Mage knew that they only needed to get reasonably close. Once they got close enough Mouse would be in a band of similar spaces and when they found him all the spaces that Mouse was in would collapse into one Mouse containing space, roughly speaking.

The Boffin had tried to explain how this worked to him one day, but gave up in frustration.

“The equations say it all. The words just don't work!” she had said. The Mage knew his maths was good, but unfortunately it was not quite good enough. Well, it wasn't the maths, but the physics. The Boffin was annoyed that she couldn't explain it, but she wasn't annoyed at him, he knew.

“Don't worry dear. I get the rough idea, and that is what matters,” he'd said to her.

Eventually the Mage and George came across a range of spaces which were almost all sea. They stood on an invisible platform hovering over the waves.

“Oh no!” said the Mage.

“What's wrong,” asked George.

“Well nothing really. It’s just that Mouse said that his Great Gran was ‘stuck’ and that there was ‘water everywhere’. I think that when we find your son, we will find your Gran too. I’ve been so stupid. I should have got Mouse to show me where his Great Gran was. I thought he was too small to understand, but he was telling me where she was all the time!”

In just two more steps, George said “He’s here.”

“Your Gran has activated her amulet! She’s here too. I thought so!”

So they stepped within the space and arrived in a small alleyway, with a chicken coop and a small door. The Mage checked that no one had seen them, then knocked on the door, which flew open to reveal the Boffin.

She said “Oh!” and threw herself into his arms. Her arms were round his neck, and she was sobbing her heart out.

She rubbed his face with her hands.

“Oh, I can’t see clearly for the tears, but I remember every detail of your face, my love. It’s hard to believe that I could have forgotten it, even for a second. Oh, my love.”

“What’s been happening, my dear. Why didn’t you activate your amulet earlier?”

“Oh, it’s a long story. Let me introduce you to my friend Snow and Chris, her husband. Snow and her seven crewmembers have been so good to me. This is her house. She’s inside with Mouse.”

George ducked into the house when she heard that, and the Boffin and the Mage followed.

The Boffin quietly said to the Mage “I called myself Eve. I called you Adam. Apparently that’s near blasphemy here. Be careful.”

She led him into Snow’s house to introduce him to Snow and Chris and to tell the Mage the whole story. She had to force herself to stop touching him to ensure he was real.

Snow listened to her explanation of how she had been travelling between spaces and had somehow collided with the boom of “New Moon Rising” causing her to fall into the sea. She listened to their explanation of the spaces and how they stepped between them. The Boffin had a feeling that Snow didn’t like the idea. In the end, Snow stopped them.

“I don’t need to know,” she said. “It’s enough to understand that you come from somewhere else, and that you can move from there to here. Can everyone there do what you can do?”

“Any human can, but most don’t know how. Would you like us to show you how?”

Snow shuddered. “No thanks. This one world or space or whatever you call it is enough for me.”

Mouse said “I want to go home, Mum.”

He was sucking his thumb while burying his head against George’s neck.

“Is that OK?” asked George. “Can I step from here please, Snow?”

Snow nodded and George and Mouse were gone. Snow and Chris gasped.

“Well, that was something else,” said Chris. Both he and Snow looked a little shocked.

“We can help you forget,” said the Mage, “if you want.”

Snow and Chris looked at each other. “No, no. We don’t need that,” said Chris. “Are you sure you aren’t the Goddess?”

“In our home space, I’m a focus, as we call it. I do have some powers, all of which I forgot when the boom hit me. A long time ago we were ordinary humans, my husband and I, but we were given the powers to do a job. A really important job. Underneath it all we are still ordinary humans, I assure you. From the stories I’ve heard the same is true of the God and the Goddess here in this space,” said the Boffin, hoping they wouldn’t feel that this was blasphemous.

The Mage said “We will be going home soon. We’ll go from outside your door, if that makes things easier?”

“Thank you,” said Snow. “I’d appreciate that. The whole thing makes me queasy.”

The Boffin said to Snow “I’d love to visit some time, but we’ll warn you first, of course. Can you please send my love and regards to the crew? I would have loved to sail some more with them, but I have to go home now.”

“Do come back,” said Snow. “You can tell me what your home is like. I’d really like to know. What’s it like to have land everywhere? Don’t the islands keep bumping into it?”

“Oh, Snow, if you’d come for a visit some time we could show you. The islands don’t float. They are fixed to the sea floor. I’ll explain more, when we come to visit.”

The Boffin kissed and hugged Snow and Chris, and she and the Mage walked out of their door. Snow called goodbye and shut the door. She really didn’t like the stepping.

The Mage turned to the Boffin and kissed her.

“I think that we should go and see this God and Goddess, while we are here,” she said. “I don’t think that it’s good for their people for them to remain so apart. Of course, we can’t force them to meet, but we can put it to them that it might be a good idea for them to suggest that people have both God and Goddess in them.”

“Yes, let’s,” said the Mage. “Goddess first?”

As they prepared to step, he continued. “Young Mouse seems to be very powerful for his age, and if I’d listened to him, I’d have found you sooner. Instead, I tried to stop him stepping. He’s too little to explain how he escaped that charm, but I’d really like to know how he did it!”

He was annoyed with himself.

“Don’t fret, my love. I sort of enjoyed it, apart from not being able to remember anything, even the shape of your face. And longing for you, even so. And having a sore head. But apart from that...”

As they stepped away she said “We should get a boat, you know. It would be fun,” and he laughed.

Selene Base

In July 1969 the Apollo 11 mission landed on the Moon. Buzz Aldrin and Neil Armstrong spent less than a day on it, and just over an hour walking on its surface. In the world, the Universe or, as they themselves termed it, the 'space' of the Mage and the Boffin, things happened slightly differently.

"I'd like to go to the Moon," said the Boffin one day.

"OK, let's step there, dear. We'd have to be careful about air, of course, because there is none up there," said the Mage.

"No, you must have read that they are sending manned missions to the Moon by rocket! They are asking for volunteers for the program."

He sighed. "Yes, I know. I was teasing. And I think you know it. Why don't you apply if you want to go?"

She kissed him. "I knew that you were teasing, of course. OK, I'll apply. Why don't you apply for a job there too?"

The Mage nodded and stroked his beard. "Yes, it might be interesting to be on the Ground Crew. I can keep my eye on you, too."

So they both applied and both were accepted. While the Mage worked his way up until he was one of the designated communicators for the manned launches, the Boffin went before the selection committee. They looked at her CV and her qualifications, and then looked at her.

"Hmm, you're a professor of Physics at Central University, I believe?"

"Yes, that is correct."

"And you've also been certified in the Air Force's ST-120 aircraft?"

"Yes, from when I was in the Air Force and I'm certified to fly them at supersonic speed, sir. I've kept up my certification as a Reserve."

"So why do you want to go to the Moon?"

The Boffin had thought about this quite a bit. She'd also bounced ideas off the Mage.

"Well, there's the attraction of being the first person on the Moon of course. I'd go down in history. Then I thought that even if I'm accepted

onto the program, I might not actually get to be the first. But even if I was on the second or third crew to get there, it would still be an enormous achievement. And this mission will advance science so much. Apart from the knowledge we gain about the Moon, from which we can learn more about the solar system, I'm sure that the technology that we develop to get to the Moon will benefit all mankind. And it's the first step to the stars."

The committee grilled her for an hour, and finally the Chairman said "Thank you, we'll let you know."

The Boffin got the nod from the selection committee, and she and the other eleven trainees gathered at the Space Centre for their training. They were referred to as the "First Intake" and all acquired nicknames, sooner or later. The Boffin was "Professor" or "Prof" almost from the start. Others such as Ross, nicknamed "Pancake", acquired theirs as the training progressed. There were three other women trainees, but they were Army and Navy. The Boffin was only female civilian trainee, but she had been in the Air Force of course.

There was friendly rivalry between the trainees as they were tested in the centrifuge and in the water tanks, the simulators and the mock-ups. They rode the "vomit comet" to experience weightlessness. They performed exercises in vacuum tanks. The Boffin easily passed all the tests, and she loved the flying training in the Air Force supplied ST-120 jets. They trained in other aircraft, of course, but she'd flown the ST-120s before, and Trainer One and Trainer Two were the latest versions. All the trainees had flown at least a few hours in the jets before they were selected, but some had more experience than the others.

As training in the jets progressed the trainees were unofficially ranked by the trainers, and two of the trainees were well out in front. One was the Boffin and the other was the top Air Force pilot, who had brought the nickname of "Ace" with him from the Air Force.

The night before the final training flight there was a knock at the Boffin's door.

"Hi, Ace, come on in," she said. "What would you like to drink? I've decaf this and decaf that, and I've even got no alcohol beer."

“Thanks Prof, I’ll have the acorn dust please.”

The Boffin made him a decaf coffee. He took a sip and made a face. “You know, I’ll be glad when we’ve been to the Moon. Then we’ll know if sipping this stuff has been worthwhile.”

“Yes, I know exactly what you mean. What can I do for you, Ace?”

“Well, it’s about the flight tomorrow. You and me, in T-1 and T-2. You see, I’m used to being ‘Top Gun’ in the ST-120 and I think that its possible that I could lose that title tomorrow. I just thought that I’d let you know that I’m OK with that if it happens, Prof. You are good. Very good. Though I’m going to try my best to beat you, of course.”

“Wow, thanks for the compliment, Ace. I love flying those beauties and I know I’m good at it. I’m not sure I’m the best though. You are very good. I’m also going to do my best tomorrow.”

“I wouldn’t want it any other way,” said Ace, smiling. “Good luck tomorrow, Prof.”

He handed back his coffee and turned to go.

“Good luck to you, too, Ace.”

He smiled again and left.

The next day they took off, the Boffin in T-1 and Ace in T-2. They both performed faultlessly, flying the loops, rolls and the other manoeuvres that the instructors required of them. Then they did a simulated flameout approach to the runway, and a touch and go each. After a few more exercises, the instructors sent them a little offshore and instructed them to run parallel to the shore. This was new!

“Accelerate to Mach 1.2,” ordered the instructor. “Repeat, Mach 1.2”

Since she was in T-1, the lead aircraft, the Boffin called “Yay! Three, two, one, go!”

Their aircraft leapt ahead, and their sonic booms startled a few seagulls as they sped up the coast.

“Come alongside, Ace,” she said, since she was in T-1.

“Roger. Thanks, Prof.”

They flew side by side for a while. The instructors gave them three minutes then called them back in. They slowed and turned back to the airport as instructed, with Ace flying beside her. He gave her a thumbs up which she returned. They landed in tandem, Ace bringing up the rear, and parked and handed their aircraft over to Ground Crew as usual. They caught a ride back to the Main Block.

“That was great!” said Ace. “They let us go supersonic. I had wondered why we had extra fuel.”

“Me too. Who did best, do you think?”

“That’s hard to tell. I think we both did well. I don’t know.”

They high fived each other.

At the main block the instructors held a debriefing session with the rest of the trainees and a few others, relatives and friends, like the Mage and Ace’s wife who was, like the Mage, a part of the Terra Base team.

“I know that you know that we have been unofficially ranking you during these flying tests,” said the chief instructor. “All of you have exceeded the requirements by a wide margin, so I’m not going to tell you all your rankings. I do know that there have been bets laid as to who would be ranked first, so I’d better tell you that. In the end, we decided that it was too hard to separate Prof and Ace, so we ranked them equal first. Well done, guys!”

Over good-natured catcalls and jeers, not to mention amicable but intense discussions about the bets, the chief instructor presented them with fake medals the size of dinner plates. Then the Moon Project Manager spoke.

“For the rest of the training, which is mostly in the simulators and classrooms, we will be separating you into four teams of three. We will announce those teams, and the order in which they will go to the Moon, shortly. We will shuffle and reorder the teams as we feel is necessary until we are happy with them.”

When the list came out, the Boffin was scheduled second and named as commander for the flight. She analysed her feelings on the matter and came to the conclusion that she was happy with the result. She felt envious of Ace and his team, who were scheduled to go first, but she

wasn't angry or even disappointed. This was a good thing, because, naturally, the Psych team questioned her about it later.

She learned that her Orbiter Pilot was going to be Hadden, who was known as "Ogre", and her Lander Pilot was to be Pancake. She knew both of them well, of course, and was pleased. They'd worked together well.

Four days before the scheduled lift off, Ace came to see her. He looked a little downcast.

"Prof, I just called in to let you know that my team has been downgraded to fourth. You are now up to number one. You are going to the Moon first."

"What? Why? How do you feel about that?"

"Yeah, well, my Lander Pilot, Blondy, dislocated his shoulder when we were getting out of the Lander simulator in full suits." Blondy, who was neither blond nor dizzy had mistaken the salt for the sugar in the mess one time and hence acquired his nickname. The Boffin recalled that his real name was Mishka.

"Oh no! Sorry to hear that. You must be gutted!"

"Not as much as Blondy. He's kicking himself. Yes, I'm gutted, but I know that you'll do us proud, Prof. We all knew that this could happen, was almost bound to happen to someone at some stage. They gave me the option of stealing Pancake off you, but I said no. At this late stage we should keep the teams together, I feel, and the bosses agreed."

The rearranged schedule meant that the testing teams suddenly concentrated their efforts on the Boffin's team. Their third member, Hadden, whose nickname of Ogre had come from his character in his favourite game, was supposed to stay aloft in the Orbiter while they were on the surface of the Moon, but theoretically he could be called on to descend with Ross or the Boffin if the other team member was unable to descend for some reason. So he had to be trained on all the surface procedures too. Besides, he was scheduled to descend at a later date.

Ross and Hadden were suited up and practising in the low gravity simulator which used weights and pulleys to simulate low gravity, when Ross missed a step and fell over. Hadden tried to help him up, but he also

fell over. They ended up laughing uncontrollably and took a long time to get up.

The Boffin was livid. “What are you two clowns playing at? Am I going to have to get replacements in, because that was just ridiculous! If you fall over up there, you could be in trouble. Serious trouble.”

“You’re right,” said Hadden, “Sorry Prof”, and he pushed Ross over again.

“Hey,” he said. Hadden helped him up.

He said, “Thanks, Ogre.” Then he pushed Hadden over and helped him up.

“Much better,” said the Boffin. “Concentrate on business, guys. It’s a matter of life and death.”

Then she pushed them both over. They struggled to their feet in next to no time, then looked at her.

“Much better,” she said, and all three burst out laughing.

The three of them were tested in all the scheduled surface activities, orbital activities, and possible failure scenarios. They worked in the simulators so often that they could point to a switch when asked while blindfolded. When they weren’t scheduled for a test or a lecture they were usually in the gym or studying the schedules.

Sometimes they practised with other members of the First Intake, and the Boffin was pleased that there didn’t seem to be any hard feelings from the others. Envy, yes, but no hard feelings.

The day before lift off day came. The medics gave the trio one last going over, and the Boffin, as usual, got quizzical looks and retests. Nominally she was the oldest of the trainees, but of course, she couldn’t tell them her real age. In the majority of the tests she tested well below her nominal age, so the medics were suspicious, and she didn’t blame them. She used some of the Mage’s mind techniques to calm their fears, and counted it as the one and only time that she had cheated during the whole time she was involved in the program.

Lift off time was just after seven in the morning of the next day. She, Hadden and Ross donned their suits at two in the afternoon, and the

technicians hooked them up to their suit's internal "waste control and disposal" systems. It was uncomfortable and intrusive, but the technician who fitted her up was efficient and matter of fact, which helped a lot.

They were loaded into a bus and driven out to the launch site where they and their minders rode the lift to the top of the large "launch vehicle". This was an amazing piece of technology in its own right being over one hundred metres tall. It had three stages, and the "Lunar Package" rode on top of it. They were fitted one by one into the large module attached to the top of the third stage of the rocket. It was around midnight, so they had around seven hours to check out their systems one last time.

In a quiet few minutes the Boffin listened to the chit chat between the dozens of people overseeing the launch. Some of it made sense, some of it was pure noise.

Voice one : "Item sixty-seven dash one, sub three, IC oxygen, seven point nine, plus or minus zero point two."

Voice two : "Seven point nine. Check."

Voice one : "Item sixty-seven dash one, sub four, IC hydrogen, zero point seven, plus or minus zero point two."

Voice two : "Zero point seven. Check."

Most of their work during this phase fell to Hadden and Ross. Her conversations were mainly with Ground Control and concerned progress through the various checklists. Gradually they got through them, and surprisingly the time seemed to pass quickly enough.

Eventually Ground Control called "Thirty minutes to lift off," and much of the chit chat fell away. All checks had been done. All checklists had been completed. The Boffin suddenly became nervous.

"Steady Prof," said Hadden. "Nearly there!"

The Boffin laughed. "Thanks, Ogre. I'm OK. It's having nothing to do that gets to me."

Thirty minutes became twenty, then ten. Chit chat started to build again, as fuel lines were purged and heaters started in the launch vehicle. A voice gave a weather report. Ten minutes became five then two. The Boffin, Hadden and Ross mostly just listened. This was launch vehicle stuff.

“T minus thirty seconds,” said the Mage. “Go for launch.”

Things started to rumble as pre-launch machines started up.

“T-minus twenty. T-minus fifteen. Ten, nine, eight, seven, six, five, four.”

“Ignition at minus seven,” said a second voice. Launch crew.

The launch module started to shake.

“Three, two, one, zero. We have lift off.”

The Boffin was pressed heavily into her seat as the roar of the big engines behind them reached a crescendo, and the rattling and shaking battered them as they soared away into the sky.

The first stage engines stopped and the stage separated and dropped away. Stage two fired, burned for a while and then it too dropped away. The third stage fired and put them into Terra orbit, but didn't separate and fall away. The Boffin, Hadden and Ross were mere passengers at the moment, so they listened to the chit chat from Ground Control, now renamed “T-Base” and relaxed as best they could in what would be the Orbiter.

“Orbiter, jettisoning nose cone now,” said the Mage for T-Base.
“Extraction in seventy-three minutes.”

“T-Base, roger. We felt the nose cone go. Starting checklist for power up of Orbiter now,” said Ogre.

The three of them started on the checklist, getting the occasional “Roger” from T-Base. They reached the pause point and awaited the call from T-Base.

“Orbiter, we have go for injection into transition trajectory. Stage three engines to fire in ten, nine, eight, seven, six, five, four, three, two, one, zero.”

The engines fired and the rattling and shaking started again, with less intensity this time. Thirty four seconds later they cut out.

“Orbiter, you are on trajectory. You are on your way to the Moon. Good luck!”

“T-Base, roger and thanks. Continuing with Orbiter checklist.”

The Boffin settled into the routine of going down the checklists. She held her hand over the locket that the Mage had given her before they had lifted off. She couldn't touch it of course as it was under her suit. The Mage-like part of her character felt comforted by it. No, she thought, it was the human part of her.

“We'll soon be able to see the stars again,” said Hadden.

T-Base came in at that point. “Extraction in twelve minutes. Counting.”

Hadden sighed.

“What's up, Ogre,” said the Boffin.

“Oh, nothing really, Prof. There's all this furious activity on checklists, and powering up and stuff. Then before anything important happens we have times when we just get to sit here and chew our fingernails. You felt it before lift off.”

“Let me know how you chew your fingernails in your suit, with the gloves on, Ogre,” responded the Boffin.

Ogre and Pancake laughed and there was even a snort from T-Base.

“Orbiter, thirty seconds to extraction, twenty, fifteen, ten, nine, eight, seven, six, five, four, three, two, one, zero.”

They felt a substantial jolt, as the third stage was jettisoned. Twelve seconds later the exterior panels of the “Lunar Package” blasted into space, allowing light to stream through the small windows in the Orbiter. The combined Orbiter and Lander continued on towards the Moon, while the third stage spun off on an orbit that would take it away from the linked craft. The Boffin remembered that it and the discarded remnants of the “Lunar Package” would now become satellites of the Sun.

“Orbiter, you have go to pressurize the Lander,” said T-Base.

Hadden, as Orbiter pilot unlatched the switch and flicked it. He waited until the pressure was equalized, then reported T-Base. “T-Base. Lander pressure OK. Do we have go to enter the Lander?”

“Orbiter, yes, we confirm pressure OK. You have go to enter the Lander and start the power up checklist.”

The Boffin unbuckled herself and pulled herself up to the Orbiter's hatch to the Lander and unlatched it. She swung the hatch open,

revealing the Lander's hatch. She lowered herself back to her couch.

“Your turn, Pancake.”

Ross pulled himself up to the dual hatches and connected the umbilicus to connect the Lander systems to the Orbiter systems. He swung the Lander hatch open into the Lander. He disappeared into the Lander, and some indicators on the Boffin's board lit up as he started to power up the Lander. She listened to the chit chat between Ross and T-Base as they started down the extensive checklist.

“Orbiter, you two should get some sleep. Lander Commander, you are scheduled to take over from Lander Pilot in eight hours.”

“T-Base, roger.”

The Boffin and Hadden settled down to sleep. They would take about two days to reach the point where the engines would be fired to put them into orbit around the Moon. While they would always have something to do, there was not as much pressure during this period.

Ross and the Boffin moved backwards and forwards between Orbiter and Lander, powering up the Lander as they coasted towards the Moon. There were scheduled correction burns, but they only needed one short one.

“The next big burn is going to be interesting,” said Ross during a break.

“Why?” asked the Boffin.

“Well, we'll be out of sight of Terra, and out of communication.”

“Mmm, yes, but we've practised it. Several times. This will just be like another practice, won't it?”

Ross mulled this over. “Yes, you're right, Prof. We've done it tens of times in practise.”

As they flew ever closer to the Moon, its gravity changed their trajectory. If the next burn did not happen they would swing around the Moon and then off into space. The Boffin thought that they would then return to somewhere near Terra, but she hadn't checked the trajectory. There was a plan for the possibility though. She knew that she had been over it at least once.

“Orbiter, you have go to enter Moon orbit. The burn will take twenty-three seconds and will occur out of radio contact. The burn is already loaded into the computers.”

“T-Base, roger,” said the Boffin.

Ross had got over his jitters. The Boffin didn't blame him for having them. She had seen the steadiest and most unshakeable people get them. She'd had them herself, once or twice!

“Orbiter, contact will be lost in five, four, three, two, one, ---.” Not only did they lose the T-Base Communicator, they lost all the other background chit chat too. It was definitely unsettling.

“Burn in forty three-seconds, guys. Thirty, twenty, ten, nine, eight, seven, six, five, four, three, two, one, zero,” said the Boffin.

The shaking jolting started as the burn began. Things rattled and a pen, impelled by the artificial gravity of the burn moved past her. She grabbed it.

“Nice catch, Prof,” said Ross.

The burn ended and the Boffin looked at her computer.

“Burn successful. Exactly on time. Thirty seconds until we re-establish contact with T-Base.”

They had a few checks to do and completed them just in time for the re-establishment of contact.

“Orbiter, T-Base confirming contact.”

“T-Base, roger. We've missed you,” said the Boffin.

“Orbiter, please keep to the script. We've missed you too.”

The Boffin laughed. In her mind T-Base was always the Mage, even when he wasn't on duty. It was actually him, this time, though.

“T-Base, roger. Starting checklist MO-1. Moon Orbit one.”

“Orbiter, roger. MO-1 Item 1A, O2 Main 1, status green.”

“T-Base, MO-1 Item 1A O2 Main 1, check.”

And so they continued. The Mage reflected that their lives were being ruled by checklists.

With the Lander powered up and ready to go, Ross and the Boffin moved into it, and Hadden shut the Orbiter's hatch and locked it. Ross shut the Lander's hatch, and the Boffin locked it from her control board.

"Lander, twenty minutes to separation. Good luck."

"T-Base, thanks. Orbiter, see you soon."

"T-Base, roger. Lander, I'll be here." All communication had to go via T-Base.

"Lander, Orbiter, separation in fifteen minutes. Lander, one final checklist before separation."

"T-Base, roger."

Ross and T-Base worked their way through the separation checklist. Sometimes they involved Hadden in Orbiter. The Boffin just listened, and finally they were done.

"Orbiter, Lander, you have go for separation. Orbiter, release your latches."

"T-Base, latches released." The two craft were only held together by the Lander's latches.

"Orbiter, Lander, separation in two minutes. One minutes. Thirty seconds, twenty seconds, ten seconds, five, four, three, two, one, zero."

There was a solid clunk as the latches unlocked and the two craft were disconnected.

"Lander Pilot, go, to back away from Orbiter."

"T-Base, roger."

Ross made small movements with his controls and Orbiter appeared to retreat in their small forward window.

"We're on our way," said Ross quietly.

Then louder. "T-Base, Lander separated from Orbiter. About two metres. Slowing."

"Lander, looking good. Go for rotation for visual inspection by Orbiter."

"T-Base, roger."

The Moon spun past the small windows in the Lander, with their intended landing site passing the lower window on every orbit. The Lander slowly drifted away from the Orbiter. T-Base monitored the separation rate and the relative positions of the two craft. Back on the home planet the ground crew compared the trajectories for deviations from the predicted values. The Lander rotated end over end as it drew away and the Orbiter Pilot, Hadden, nicknamed Ogre, visually checked it out.

“T-Base, Lander checks out OK, visually,” he said.

“Orbiter, roger. Lander, stabilize for descent.”

“T-Base, stabilizing attitude for descent burn,” said Ross.

The Mage said into his microphone “Lander, all is green. Descent burn in eleven minutes twelve seconds. Duration forty-three point three seconds.”

“Roger, T-Base,” said the Boffin from her seat in the Lander.

The Mage’s voice counted down towards the burn. The Boffin and Ross had nothing to do, except watch for red lights and wait. They listened to the constant chit chat about their height above the Moon, the distance to the target landing area, even their own physical condition, their heart rates and so on. Even when the Mage was silent, the background messages went on, and timing bleeps came over the radio channel.

“Lander, sixty seconds. Still green for go.”

“Roger that,” said the Boffin.

“Ten, nine, eight, seven, six, five, four, three, two, one, zero. Ignition of main Lander engine.”

Abruptly the Lander started to shake violently and Ross and the Boffin were hammered in the back by its engines. After forty-three seconds the shaking stopped, and they were back to free fall again.

“Lander, injection into descent orbit confirmed. All lights green. Go for landing,”

“T-Base. Roger that,” said the Boffin. She gave Ross the thumbs up, and he returned it.

T-Base kept calling out range and height. Everything was on track for landing, and they simply waited in free fall, performing checks, until T-Base passed control to Ross for the landing.

“Lander, control of Lander to Lander Pilot in ten, nine, eight, seven, six, five, four, three, two, one, zero,” said The Mage at T-Base. “You have control, Lander.”

Ross’ controls and his board lit up. Of course his control movements would be fed through the Lander’s computer, so it was a joint effort between Ross and the computer. The Boffin hovered her hands over her control board and unlatched the “Abort” button. The computer would follow the predicted trajectory down to about one hundred metres, and then Ross would land the Lander manually, with computer assist. The Boffin’s main job was to monitor everything and hit the “Abort” button if necessary.

T-Base started calling numbers, range and height.

“Lander, engine ignition in ten, nine, eight, seven, six, five, four, three, two, one, zero,” said T-Base and the shaking restarted.

The noise was deafening, and the shaking was so bad that the Boffin had trouble keeping her hands on her control board. She knew that it was worse for Ross as he continually adjusted thrust and attitude. She was confident of his abilities, though, as she had seen how good he was in training.

As the burn slowed their horizontal velocity, they tilted, so that their fall was also slowed a little. The shaking eased a little as the engines were throttled back.

“One thousand metres. Five hundred. Three hundred. One fifty,” said the Boffin. Their sideways velocity had fallen rapidly, and they were now descending almost vertically. “One hundred, eighty, seventy, sixty. Drifting only slightly.”

She felt the sideways engines firing as Ross kept them on trajectory. The main engines fired in bursts as Ross adjust their descent.

“Fifty, forty, thirty, twenty...”

“Lander, all green for landing,” broke in T-Base.

“Twenty two,” said the Boffin. “Eighteen, twenty, twenty-two, eighteen, fifteen, ten.”

Ross was hovering the Lander as he searched for a clear spot.

“Twelve, ten, eight, five, four, contact light, two, one. Touch down!”

The engines automatically cut out as the Lander legs touched down. The Boffin and Ross were jolted forward then back as the shock was absorbed by the legs of the Lander.

“T-Base, this S-Base, S for Selene. We are down in one piece, I confirm.”

“S-Base, roger,” said the Mage. “Congratulations, S-Base.”

Ross and the Boffin could hear the cheering at T-Base behind his voice.

“We did it, Prof,” said Ross.

“Sure did, Pancake.” Ross’ nickname had been given to him because a landing gear failure in early training had forced him to perform a belly landing. Safely.

The Boffin reflected that her space suit, while it could not be described as uncomfortable, could not be described as comfortable either. It was inflexible. Inconvenient. While she could not turn her head or bend at the waist, she could bend her arms fairly well. The same could not be said for her legs. She could bend them, but it wasn’t easy.

They had been on the ground on the Moon for a few hours now and the Mage, back on the home planet, had given them the go ahead to exit from the Lander.

“S-Base, you are go for depressurization and exit from the Lander.”

The Boffin and Ross had already sealed their helmets and were ready to lose all air.

“Roger, T-Base. Depressurizing now.” The Boffin flicked the switch.

Not much seemed to happen, though the suits may have stiffened a little.

“S-Base Commander, pressure at zero. You are go to pop the hatch.”

The Boffin lifted the cover on the hatch release switch on her keyboard and flipped it. There was a clunk.

“T-Base, I’m opening the hatch and proceeding to the top of the ladder.”

She moved to the hatch and reached for the hatch lever. She had to lean backwards slightly to get enough leverage, but she got it unlatched then she pushed it, leaning forwards and it swung open and clicked into place.

“T-Base, hatch open. Nice view.”

She turned around somehow got down on hands and knees, then backed into the hatch. Her suit’s back pack got caught on the hatch a couple of times, but eventually she made it. When she was clear she lifted herself to a kneeling position, and then raised herself using the hand rails until she was standing on the small platform outside of Lander. She reflected that she had entered a new world backside first.

As practised on Terra, she leaned back a little and moved a boot down to the first rung of the ladder. She repeated the process until she couldn’t feel a next rung. She nodded to herself, then holding the hand rails she did a little bunny hop and was standing on the Moon’s surface.

“T-Base. That’s the first big step into the Universe for humankind. I’m down on the surface. It’s sort of powdery and clings to my boots. Ready for Lander Pilot.”

“S-Base, Pilot, you are go for exit.”

“T-Base, roger,” said Ross.

The Boffin watched as Ross wriggled his way out of the Lander. His suit got caught on the hatch a couple of times too, but he made it out and climbed down the ladder. She looked around. Everything was monochrome, except for some coloured panels on the Lander, and the logos and stickers on it and their suits.

“T-Base, we are both outside the Lander. Ready to start the EV task list.”

“S-Base, roger. Please deploy the flag, which is in Lander Pilot’s A1A.”

All the pockets on the suits were numbered. A1A was on Ross’ right thigh. The Boffin leaned slightly forward to pop the seal and removed the rolled up flag. She handed it to Ross, who extended the pole and tried to push it into the dirt. It went in a little, but not enough to stand by itself.

He retrieved it and opened three support legs, and then pushed it in again. With the support legs and the thirty or forty millimetres the pole that went into the ground, it was stable enough. There was, of course, no wind to blow it over. Ross unfolded the flag and its stiffener pole, and they were done. They faced the flag and the Boffin and Ross saluted it.

“T-Base. Flag deployed. Penetration of the pole was about thirty millimetres. Stabilizers deployed. The ground here is pebbles and small rocks, a covering of dust, loose soil. Samples should be simple to obtain,” reported the Boffin.

“S-Base, roger. Commander, deploy the collection device. In Lander Pilot’s A2B”

She removed the device, which was essentially a claw with a scoop, from Ross’ pocket. She selected a small rock and picked it up. It was made difficult by the suit, which restricted her movements.

“Small rock, going into Lander Pilot’s B11.”

With difficulty, she dropped the rock into Ross’ first sample pocket. He then sealed it with a snap.

“Three-four pebbles, going in Lander Pilot’s B12,” she reported.

Finally, she picked up some dust, which tended to fly everywhere and put it into Ross’ B13 pocket.

“T-Base, reporting that this is unexpectedly strenuous, for the record. It shouldn’t stop us performing the scheduled tasks though. Passing collection device to Lander Pilot.”

She gave the device to Ross, who filled her sample pockets. His rock was a little large, but went in eventually.

They used the scoop device to gather more samples from around the site, each bagged and tagged and stored in a larger bag. This would be loaded into the Lander later.

“T-Base, collections done, query photographs next?” she asked.

S-Base said “Confirmed.”

The Boffin and Ross retrieved their cameras from each other’s pockets and started on the scheduled series of photographs, including pictures of each other.

“T-Base, confirm OK to move away from the Lander, please?”

“S-Base, confirmed.”

They bunny-hopped to about fifty metres from the Lander, and started on the second series of photographs. Ross photographed a larger rock near their stopping point. He scraped it with a pointed tool and then took another photo of it. The Boffin covered the Lander from their new vantage point, as well as taking other photos in the same direction as in the first set. It was planned to make stereo pairs for the stereographic viewer.

They collected more rock, pebbles and dust and bagged and tagged it into a second large bag. There was a risk that the first set of samples had been contaminated by the Lander’s engine.

“Pancake, what do you think of the view,” said the Boffin.

Ross looked around. “Mmm, very monochrome, Prof. Brilliant highlights, but not much reflection. Deep blacks in shadows, so it’s almost impossible to see into them. Difficult to judge the terrain and distances.”

“I’d agree with that. Not much to add. T-Base, did you copy that?”

“S-Base, yes thanks. You should head back to the Lander, now. You’ve been out forty-three of the scheduled fifty-six minutes, and you have just the two science packages to deploy, each of which takes five minutes. So you are slightly behind schedule.”

“T-Base, roger.”

They stowed the cameras back into their pockets, then bunny hopped back to the Lander where they unlocked the two packages from the outside of the Lander and each took one to deploy. The Boffin listened to the chit chat between Ross and T-Base. His experiment was soon deployed. The Boffin struggled with hers, as the drill refused to bite. T-Base had a few suggestions, but they didn’t work.

Ross came over. “Trouble, Prof?” He’d heard her chit chat with T-Base.

“Yeah. Drill won't bite.”

Ross had a go, but it still didn’t work. Finally, they both put their weight on the drill and it went in. After that the package deployed quickly and easily enough.

Ross prepared to enter the Lander. He grabbed the guide bars and hopped onto the ladder.

“Whoa!” he said as he sailed past the first rung and onto the second. “Watch that, Prof. It’s easy to jump too far.”

“Thanks, Pancake.”

He carefully climbed the remaining rungs and knelt on the platform and crawled into the Lander. She winched up the large sample bags and Ross reached out through the hatch and grabbed them and brought them into the Lander. She followed him up the ladder, carefully jumping to the first rung. She thought to herself that she could probably hop up the rungs. Still, it wasn’t the time to experiment, so she climbed up the conventional way.

Crawling into the Lander was more difficult than she expected, probably because she was tired, but she got there in the end. It felt like home! She pulled the hatch to and latched it, then sank into her couch.

“T-Base, we’re back in the buggy,” she joked. “Confirm OK to pressurize.”

Back on Terra, the Mage snorted. “S-Base, confirmed.”

The Boffin flicked the switch to lock the hatch and the cabin filled with the breathable air mixture. Unfortunately on this initial mission they were not permitted to remove their helmets, but those on subsequent missions would be allowed to do so. However, they could now unlatch their helmets and breath the cabin air, which was a bit fresher.

“S-Base, you’re scheduled to take a meal, then sleep for eight hours.”

“T-Base, confirmed.”

She rolled her eyes at Ross and took the prescribed number of mouthfuls of what even the Ground Team called “Baby food”. It oozed up the food tube like thick soup. She found it to be just the right side of unpleasant, but it was all she had until they were back on Terra. Then she and Ross somehow managed to drop off to sleep.

“S-Base, T-Base calling. Time to wake up.”

The voice was familiar, but it wasn’t the Mage, who had finished his shift while she was asleep. It was a Navy officer called Miles. The Mage

probably hadn't left though, she thought.

"T-Base, we're both awake."

"S-Base, status is go for ascent to the Orbiter. T minus forty-two minutes. Please proceed with checklist."

"T-Base, please tell Orbiter Pilot we will be up to join him shortly." Of course, he knew that.

"S-Base, will do." Miles was relaxed about her off-script request.

They settled down to perform the checklists. With five minutes to go they sealed their helmets and went to suit air.

"S-Base, arm the lift off mechanisms. That's AA-1, AA-2, and AB-6."

The Boffin lifted the covers and flipped the switches. "AA-1, AA-2, AB-6."

"S-Base, T minus thirty seconds, twenty, fifteen, ten, nine, eight, seven, six, five, four, three, two, one, zero."

Nothing happened.

The Boffin said "T-Base, we do not have..."

Then the engines fired, and they were on their way up to meet Orbiter, but with a delay of five seconds.

"Lander, there appears to have been a five-second delay in ignition of the ascent engines. Please hold while we check."

The engines continued to fire as they were pushed into orbit. Then they shut off, and the Boffin estimated that they had shut off five seconds later than expected. Good. Everything was delayed by five seconds, so they would reach the correct orbit, but five seconds or several hundred kilometres further behind the Orbiter than scheduled.

"Lander, we confirm clean separation and injection into orbit. We confirm a five-second delay in ignition and cut-off. We are checking the implications. Please hold."

The Boffin said "T-Base, roger, holding."

Down on Terra, the Mage looked at the Computer, Col. "What do you think, Col? What effect will the delay of five seconds have?"

The "Computer", Col, was one of those individuals who could perform vast calculations very quickly and intuitively in his head. He

looked at the numbers and shook his head.

“I don’t see it making much difference. Docking with Orbiter might be a minute or two late, and they might have to do a mini burn to catch him, while in orbit. But they’ve got enough fuel. Then they should be able to make a correction burn or two on the way back, if necessary. Mmm. Yes, though we will have to put it through the computer for confirmation, of course.”

The Mage conveyed this estimate to Miles, who relayed it to Lander and Orbiter.

“Lander, we have to confirm, but everything looks good. Schedules will be revised as we get the figures through.”

“T-Base, roger from Lander,” said the Boffin.

“T-Base, roger from Orbiter too,” said Hadden.

As they rose from the Moon’s surface, there were a couple of other shorter burns which nudged them into the same orbit as the Orbiter.

“Lander, you will approach the Orbiter slightly faster than expected, but within operational parameters, and slower than some training exercises. Loading the docking program into the computer.”

“T-Base, roger,” replied the Boffin.

The docking program would only get them so close. Ross would control their craft, with the assistance of the computer, to complete final few metres of the docking.

“Lander, you are thirty kilometres below and two hundred and fifty behind Orbiter and approaching at ten kilometres a minute. Three second burn in five, four, three, two, one.”

Slowly the distance between the Lander and the Orbiter shrank.

“T-Base, Orbiter sees Lander,” said Hadden suddenly.

“Orbiter, roger. Did you copy, Lander?”

“T-Base, affirmative. We don’t see Orbiter yet.”

Two more minutes passed before Orbiter appeared in the forward window.

“T-Base, Lander now sees Orbiter,” said the Boffin.

Slowly the craft drew closer to one another. Eventually they were ten metres or so apart.

“Lander, you are go to dock with Orbiter.”

“T-Base, roger. Lander approaching Orbiter now. Ten metres, eight metres, six metres...” said the Boffin, as Lander approached Orbiter. Ross was trying to align a template on Lander with a target on the Orbiter. He approached to three metres and then stopped.

“Pancake, what’s the issue?” asked the Boffin, concerned.

Ross was sweating and his hands were trembling.

“Pancake, this is a practice. I’ve never seen you miss in a practice.”

Ross looked at her. “A practice? Oh, yes. OK, Prof. Thanks.”

He knew what she meant. He relaxed, wiped his hands, and edged Lander closer and closer to the Orbiter. A rod on the Lander slid into a socket on the Orbiter and a green light on the Boffin’s board came on. A solid clunk told them that their clamps had locked onto the Orbiter. Some indicator lights came on.

“T-Base, Lander docked to Orbiter,” said Ross.

“Orbiter, go to lock onto to Lander, open your hatch, and connect the umbilicus.”

“T-Base, roger,” said Hadden.

Another solid clunk told them that Orbiter’s clamps had locked on to Lander. Then they could hear a rattling as Hadden connected the umbilicus, which carried air and direct communications between the two craft.

“T-Base, locked on, hatch opened and umbilicus connected,” said Hadden.

A section of the Boffin’s control panel lit up with green lights.

“Lander, go to open your hatch,” said T-Base.

The Boffin unlocked the hatch on her control board and swam up to the hatch and unlatched it. She pulled it towards her, and she could see into Orbiter.

“Welcome back guys,” said Hadden, in the Orbiter. His voice echoed oddly through the communication systems.

The Boffin and Ross transferred the sacks of moon rock and other specimens from the Lander to the Orbiter. Then they removed and bagged the specimens from their suit pockets, which essentially meant removing the sealed pockets to avoid contamination. These were all stowed away in a safe and the safe was sealed. The Boffin also copied all the Lander logs to a tape storage device, and stored the device and all the checklists into another safe.

“T-Base. Specimens, logs and checklists are safely locked away.”

“Orbiter. You are go to shut down the Lander.”

The Boffin and Ross re-entered the Lander and started to shut down the systems. Then they returned to the Orbiter. Before the Boffin shut the Lander’s hatch from the outside, she took one last look around, and sighed. She disconnected the umbilicus and shut the Orbiter’s hatch.

“Lock the hatch please Ogre, and let T-Base know.”

“T-Base, Orbiter hatch closed and locked. Orbiter latches released,” said Hadden.

“Orbiter, go to undock and jettison Lander.”

“Can we do this, please, Ogre?” asked the Boffin.

“Sure, Prof. You or Pancake?”

“Pancake, go ahead.”

“T-Base, countdown please,” said Ross.

“Orbiter, ten, five, four, three, two, one, zero.”

Ross pushed the button and the Orbiter jolted as the latches holding the Lander were released. Little thrusters would push the Lander ascent stage away from the Orbiter and it would eventually crash into the Moon.

“T-Base, Lander ascent stage jettisoned.”

“Orbiter, roger. Trans-Terra burn in twenty minutes.”

“I’ll miss that box of bolts,” said the Boffin.

“Me, too,” said Ross.

“Orbiter, roger that,” said T-Base, even though they weren’t officially required to comment.

“T-Base, thanks,” said the Boffin, pleased.

“Orbiter, back to business. Post jettison checklist is O-97, starting at item thirty-seven.”

“T-Base, roger.”

And off they went again.

That kept them busy until T-base said “Contact will be lost in ten, nine, eight, seven, six, five, four, three, two, one., --”

“Trans Terra burn in fifteen, ten, five, four, three, two, one, zero,” said the Boffin.

Orbiter shook as her engines fired. The jolting was less than they had experienced in the Lander but was disconcerting nevertheless. The engines cut out just as they emerged from behind the Moon.

“Orbiter, confirming contact. Trajectory looks good. You are homeward-bound.”

“T-Base, roger.”

They had two and a bit days to coast back to Terra, with maybe one mid course correction. They would sleep, eat, and tackle several more checklists before they configured the Orbiter for splashdown.

“Orbiter, time to wake up. You have a long day ahead.”

“T-Base, roger,” replied the Boffin, yawning.

“Orbiter, the breakfast today is full English, and the drink is coffee.”

The Boffin grimaced. “T-Base, roger. Not funny.”

Hadden and Ross were also awake. They sucked up the “full English” from their food tubes and the “coffee” from their drink tubes. Of course, they didn’t taste anything like full English, but they didn’t exactly taste bad.

“Orbiter, if you are all awake and fed, we will start configuring the Command Module.”

“T-Base, sorry, we are ready.”

Hadden and T-Base started a long conversation. Basically, they were going to jettison the Orbiter power plant, attitude thrusters, fuel tanks and other gear that they had no more use for. The craft would shrink to

become just the Command Module, which had no engines, just attitude thrusters.

They would re-enter Terra's atmosphere at the highest speed yet achieved by a spacecraft. They would skip across the atmosphere like a stone skimming water, re-enter and streak through the atmosphere. When they had slowed sufficiently their parachutes would open, and they would splash down in the ocean. Things were likely to get rough.

There were a series of clunks as bits of the craft were jettisoned. Some would miss Terra, most would burn up in the atmosphere, and some might achieve orbit for a while.

"Command Module, twelve minutes to re-entry. Eighteen minutes seventeen seconds to radio blackout."

"T-Base, roger."

"Command Module, five minutes."

"T-Base, for the record we're feeling the effects of the atmosphere. A few light jolts.

"Command Module, one minute."

"T-Base, buffeting increasing."

"Command Module, re-entry point reached, six minutes and five seconds to radio blackout."

The Command Module was entering the atmosphere backwards and the protective screen was boiling off, as designed. All that could be seen from the forward windows was the glow of the ablative material as it boiled off.

Then the buffeting eased and the glow diminished.

"No nerves, Pancake?"

"No, Prof," he said, surprised. "There's nothing I can do, is there?"

The buffeting increased again and the glow reappeared. This time the intensity of the buffeting increased and the glow from the shield material lit up the interior of the Module.

Then the buffeting died away and the glow ceased. They had slowed to the point where friction was no longer melting the shield.

The Boffin looked at the clock and schedule. “Three minutes thirty-three seconds to deployment of drogue chutes.”

There was no radio contact with T-Base. T-Base, or rather the Recovery Team, would probably see their chutes before full radio contact was achieved. As it was, the radio was emitting only clicks, buzzes and other noise.

A bump shook the Module.

“Drogues deployed.” said Hadden.

A much larger bump shook them.

“Main chutes deployed.”

They were still falling of course, but more slowly.

“Command ... Confirm, you have ... them ... chutes ... twenty ... metres,” said the radio.

“T-Base, we hear you but you are breaking up,” said the Boffin. “We have chutes deployed.”

“Command Mod... We have visual contact. We see y..., range about ...”

“T-Base, we got about fifty percent of that. We are swinging like a pendulum and rotating.”

“Command Module, about three minutes to splash down. Do you read me?”

“T-Base, roger. We now read you one hundred per cent.”

“Command Module, one chute is partially deployed. You will hit hard, but not too hard.”

“T-Base, roger that.”

“Hold on guys. You heard the man,” the Boffin said.

The Command Module smashed into the water and rebounded a little, rocking wildly as it did so. The three crew members were jolted and spun around, but that didn't last long.

“Deploy the floatation devices, Ogre. H-3” They didn't need T-Base for that.

Hadden, flipped the switch and various bangs and rattles indicated that the floats were being deployed, and the Command Module stabilized. All

that was left was a steady up and down cycle as the waves lifted and dropped the Module.

“T-Base, Command Module is down and all OK, but a bit shaken up. Come and get us! Sorry, I mean ‘Command Module ready for retrieval’.”

“Command Module, roger, coming to get you. Divers will be with you in about twelve minutes. Inflatables in eighteen.”

Clanks and bangs signalled the arrival of the divers, whose job it was to check that the Command Module wasn't going to sink or drift away.

“T-Base, confirming divers have arrived.”

“Command Module, roger. Inflatables in three. Go to unlock the hatch.”

Hadden lifted the cover and unlocked the hatch.

“T-Base, hatch unlocked.”

The exit hatch was designed to only open from inside in an emergency, so they waited for the inflatables. A slight bumping announced the arrival of the inflatables, and with a hiss and a clang the hatch was opened.

“Hi, welcome to Terra,” said the sailor who appeared in the hatch. “Here are your landing kits.”

He passed three packages through to the crew, who started to remove their spacesuits, and began to change into their “recovery suits”. That's a fancy name for overalls, thought the Boffin.

“Command Module, the Carrier Narcissus will be there in about forty-five minutes. Cruiser Knightsbridge in twenty-five. Navy tells me that they will get you out of there, well before that.”

“T-Base, roger.”

In the restricted space removal of the spacesuits was cumbersome, but eventually they managed to change to the recovery suits. They passed the safes with the specimens out to the sailors in the inflatables, and then were ready to leave the Command Module. For some reason they all hesitated.

“Come on guys, no time to get nostalgic. You first, Pancake, then me, and then Ogre.”

Ross scrambled out of the hatch and disappeared.

“Sign off, Ogre,” said the Boffin. Then she started to climb out of the Module.

“T-Base, we’re disembarking, Command Module signing off,” said Hadden.

“Command Module, roger.”

Then Hadden followed the Boffin out of the craft.

“Do you think that I should have gone?” said the Boffin.

They were relaxing at home after all the de-briefing, and the television appearances, and the parades had finished. They were sitting on the sofa. The Mage had his arm around her, and she was leaning against him with her feet tucked up on the seat.

“Mmm, because you are the Boffin? Well, you applied like any other citizen, you were selected, you passed all the tests, and you did all the training. No one knows you are the Boffin, so why not? Did you use any of the powers given to you as Boffin to excel in the tests? Or any that you’ve learnt from me?”

“No, of course not. That would be cheating and wrong. But maybe I did well in the tests because I’m the Boffin. Maybe I bumped someone else out of the program without realizing it.”

The Mage thought a bit. “Didn’t you tell me that you were a national fencing champion, and you were a national class middle distance runner, though you didn’t win any of the top races? You know that I dislike playing sports and games with you because you are so competitive? In addition, you were a top scientist with several highly regarded papers to your name? Not to mention your service in the Air Force. And that was all before we met, and became the Mage and the Boffin? I’d heard of you before the war started and everything got turned upside down.”

“Had you? I didn’t know that. I’d heard of you too. I was always defending you to my colleagues, which didn’t always go down well towards the end. How strange that we knew about each other before we met.”

“But anyway, you were always a competitive achiever, even before you became the Boffin. I think that you would have got into the program even you hadn’t been the Boffin.”

She kissed him. “Maybe you’re biased.”

He snorted. “Of course I am. But I’m right.”

They were companionably quiet for a while.

“I’m going up there again, remember? As Popeye’s Orbiter Pilot and Yoyo’s Lander Pilot.”

He nodded.

“What if I had been killed up there?”

The Mage seemed to consider this seriously. “I don’t know. There’s that young physicist that you’ve been lunching with. Ooof!”

She’d elbowed him in the ribs.

“Yeah,” she said. “Joking aside, she’d make a good Boffin. You and I both tend to believe in determinism and are sceptical about freewill. Maybe if I was killed, you would eventually hook up with Anna or someone else, and she would become the new Boffin. I’d hate to think of you grieving for ever. But you should have said that you’d be devastated!”

“Of course I would. You know that. Oh, you wanted me to say it. So sorry. It was so obvious to me that I made a joke of it.”

She seemed mollified. He thought a bit.

“Well, I would be shattered, as you know. I don’t know what would happen then. We don’t know much about this Mage and Boffin thing, when I come to think of it. Maybe there would be a new Boffin, but I can’t say that the idea is very appealing. Maybe I’d stop being the Mage, and some other couple would take up the reins. I’d be a sad old man, ageing like anyone else.”

Her eyes misted over. “Oh, I love you so much. Shall I withdraw from the program?”

“What! Do you want to? I don’t think you do, do you?”

“I don’t want to, but it makes me sad thinking of you, all by yourself, if I should get killed.”

“My dear, we are a team. You’re the one that goes out and helps out the dragons or tells off the Prince. I’m the one who stays and home and reads his books and reflects on the deep mysteries.”

Of course, they both did what was necessary, and usually did it together, but in a funny sort of way he was correct.

“We were given these powers, remember,” he continued. “We didn’t ask for them. We are still human, and we still have the human urges to succeed and to enjoy our lives. We shouldn’t hide away because we might take someone else’s place, and we shouldn’t be scared of what might happen to either one of us. That would be such a miserable existence. So don’t withdraw from the program. You would regret it, and if you regretted it, so would I.”

“Thank you, my love,” she said. “You’re a wise, wise man.”

“I know,” he said. “I know.”

Cloud Skiing

It was a perfect day. The Mage flexed his wing suit and hauled his cloud skis into the small plane. His jump supervisor checked everything, including the emergency parachute packed into his backpack.

The jump supervisor checked the other jumpers then gave the thumbs up to the pilot. The small plane droned down the runway, and took off over the cliffs at the end of the runway. The Mage was used to the take-offs and so were the rest of the jumpers, so the pilot didn't bother with the customary dip over the cliffs at the end of the runway that he used to thrill the tourists.

The Mage chatted with the other jumpers, most of whom he knew. Some were old friends, and others just jump acquaintances. The small plane gradually gained height. He re-checked his gear, as did all the others. It was a reflex.

The pilot climbed to about a few hundred metres above the top of the clouds. The jumpers were all eyeing the cloud scenery and picking out likely cloud stacks, but the jump decisions were made by the jump master.

The Mage was third in the jump list. He waited and watched as the first two jumpers left the plane. The pilot then circled back to look for a good cloud stack, but the Mage was used to the delays and waited patiently in the open hatch. Then the jump supervisor told him to jump.

He exited the plane, then spread his wingsuit to slow his fall. Of course the extended cloud skis made manoeuvring a little difficult. He looked at the cloud scape below him and picked a promising route, but of course that would likely change when he got down there.

Then came the tricky bit. He turned on his cloud skis, and they were enveloped in a blue glow. The Mage stalled his flight and settled momentarily on a cloud peak, then headed downwards on the cloud skis, following a big rift in the cloud. He'd fall straight through the cloud if he stopped for more than an instant.

The feedback from the cloud skis in his earphones was a thrumming noise, which changed pitch as he sped downwards. Part of the skill of the sport was 'reading' the tone of the thrumming as he twisted and turned through the canyons of mist.

The thrumming was related to the moisture density gradient in the cloud. The cloud skis were engineered to push the skier towards the least dense parts of the cloud, but they couldn't completely overrule gravity.

The Mage knew that his time in the cloud was limited. He'd be able to drop maybe half a kilometre before he ran out of cloud. He turned left and right to follow the slopes that would give him the maximum time in the cloud, but the difficulty was that close up, the margins between the cloud and clear air were blurred and distances were hard to judge. As the canyons of cloud started to gather around him he realized that his luck would soon run out.

He made a tight turn, with his skis thrumming loudly in his earphones and saw nothing but a white wall in front of him. He plunged into the white wall, and the cloud swirled around him. If he was very, very lucky, he knew that when he emerged he might be able to continue to ski the cloud at a lower level, but this time he emerged into a clear sky. At least he hadn't just fallen out of the bottom of the cloud.

He clicked off his skis and opened his wing suit, and checked his location. He was north of the jump site, but the terrain sloped to the east. He called in his location as he looked for a touch down point. His skis pivoted on his heels so that they aligned with his body, but they were still ungainly. He flew diagonally across the terrain with his wing suit wide open. Not finding much, he turned one eighty degrees and crossed the slope in the opposite direction, but of course he was now much lower down. He was hoping that he wouldn't have to deploy his emergency parachute.

There was a large gulley opening to the east just to the north of his location, so he side-slipped until he was headed down the gulley and feathered his wing suit so that he landed crosswise on the steep snow slope in the gulley. As he touched down his cloud skis clicked back to their usual position, doubling as snow skis, and he zigzagged down the gulley. It was a little steeper than he had expected, with a few drops being necessary, but he managed to handle it with relative ease.

The gulley opened out, and he skied over a small drop, landing safely in a wide snow covered field which sloped towards the road. He coasted down the slope until it levelled out. When he came to a halt, he was a hundred metres from the road and he called in his position again. He skied to the road and removed his skis. He had to wait twenty minutes or

so, but he wasn't worried about the wait. He'd experienced a lot longer in the past.

The pickup vehicle had to pick up two more jumpers, so the Mage chatted with those who had already been picked up about their jumps. They all seemed to have had a good run, and the Mage was happy with his. Traditionally no one had a bad run. They picked up the other two jumpers and headed back to the lodge. The jumpers shared a sip of brandy, as was also the tradition,

When the Mage's party reached the lodge he stored his gear in his locker and went in search of the Boffin. As he guessed she was in the lounge, snoozing in front of the big log fire, her feet up on a footstool. On one side of her was a pile of wool and knitting. On the other side was a pile of books. Spread across her swollen belly was a scientific journal.

She had once confided to him that when she was pregnant she couldn't really concentrate on the journals and textbooks, but felt soothed by them.

He'd just said "Ah-huh!" in response to her revelation, and was surprised when she gave him a teary hug.

"Oh, I love you so much. I thought that you'd laugh at me."

"My dear," he explained, "you are bag of competing hormones when pregnant. You forget that I'm an expert on moods and feelings, and I'm not surprised that your books and journals soothe you. How many times have I taken your book, book marked it, and put it beside your side of the bed when you have fallen asleep reading it? Your books and journals are so much a part of you."

So he wasn't surprised to find her with the journal on her baby bump. He gently removed it but she woke up.

"Oh, hello dear," she said. "Did you have a good jump?"

"Yes, thanks. The weather was splendid, and the clouds were great. And when I got down to ground level the snow was crisp and great to ski on. I'm going to meet some of the boys in the bar later, unless you want me to stay with you."

She shook her head. "No, I'm going to have a lie down on the bed, but I want a foot rub, if you don't mind."

She started to stand and he helped her up. They gathered up her books and her knitting and slowly made their way to the lift.

“I always feel so huge at this stage,” she said.

He helped her up to their room and ensured that she was as comfortable as she could be on the bed. Then he gave her feet a massage, and she dozed off. He made sure that she had her phone close by, and prepared to go and meet his friends.

“See ya later, dear,” she said sleepily, “Enjoy yourself.”

“I won’t be long, my dear,” he said, and slipped out of the door.

Mouse's Friend

When the Boffin got back from the market, the Mage helped her unpack her purchases, and they stored them away. Then she put her hands on her hips.

“Well then, tell me. What is it?”

“What, my dear?” he said innocently.

“You're smiling, you're whistling, and you are hiding something. You've got some sort of surprise up your sleeve.”

“Who me? I've just been gardening while you've been away.”

“And?”

He took pity on her.

“Well, I received a visit from Mouse, and... Let me show you. Then I'll tell the story.”

He took her hand and stepped.

She looked around and said “Well, I never.”

They stepped back.

“Where was that? It looked like... Hell? What has Mouse got to do with it? Does George know?”

“Yes, Georgina does know. Mouse is the one who took us there. I'll tell you what happened. By the way, it's beautiful if you switch your vision to the infrared.”

Mouse was one of the Mage and Boffin's great-grandsons. He'd learned very quickly how to step and this was causing his mother, George, all sorts of problems. Once, Mouse had found the Boffin when she was lost, and he had a knack of getting around the spells and charms that the Mage had used to try to stop him stepping. The best that the adults could do was to give him a protective charm pendant and ensure, using a spell, that he couldn't lose it. The Boffin also installed a locator in the pendant so that they could always find him.

It didn't seem to matter too much. Mouse seemed to want to spend his time with his great-grandfather and the Mage was pleased to have him

around. Mouse watched closely as the Mage made up potions and charms in his laboratory, and was able to point to the components and ingredients, and name them.

“Hemlock! Rose petals! Alooooooniumum. Bella Donna. Copper, nickel, ferrous, sulphur. Jasper likes sulphur. Brrrimstone. That’s the same.”

“Yes, it is the same. And it’s “iron”, not “ferrous”. Who is Jasper?”

“My friend.” Mouse was still struggling with language, which seemed to be a family thing. His sister was much the same before she went to school.

“Cuprous, cupric, copper?” he said.

“Yeah, like iron but copper. Well done!”

When the Mage was working in the garden, tending his herbs or planting vegetables, he’d suddenly find that Mouse was helping him.

“What’cha doing Great-grandpa?”

“Pulling up the weeds, Mouse. Do you want to help?”

Mouse pointed to a hemlock plant. “Weed?”

“No, that’s hemlock. This is a weed.”

“Ah, hemlock, like in the lab. OK.”

Mouse started pulling up the weeds with gusto. The Mage kept an eye on him, and saw that he was doing well.

“That’s a weed too, Mouse. You can pull those up.”

“OK.” Mouse continued to pull up weeds and patted the soil into place around the roots of the Mage’s plants where the weed pulling had disturbed them, just like the Mage did. The Mage was impressed. And so was the Boffin when she saw what they had achieved.

“Well done, Mouse. Those plants will grow much better without all the weeds.”

Mouse nodded. “Much better. Any cake, Great Gran?”

“Sure, Mouse.” She glanced at the clock. “You have to go home soon, though.”

She gave Mouse some cake and a glass of water, and when he’d finished them, he gave both of them a hug and stepped back home. The

Boffin pulled out her pocket device to check that he had arrived OK.

“He’s a lovely little fellow, isn’t he. A little odd, but nice. Still, his sister turned out OK.”

The Mage was at the shack in dragon space when he was suddenly aware that Mouse was lying on the other lounge. The Boffin was due in half an hour or so.

“Hullo Mouse,” said the Mage. “You’re not going to tell me that Great Gran is stuck are you?”

Mouse had been the first to tell him that the Boffin was “stuck”. She’d been coming home when she had hit her head and lost her memory. The Mage reflected that Mouse had found him in dragon space, even though that wasn’t their home space.

“Nah, she’s talking to a man about eggs.”

The Mage nodded. That would be right. “Do you want to see some dragons?”

“Yeah!”

The Mage took Mouse’s hand, and they stepped to a peak that the Mage knew about. It was close to the nest of the local dragon Queen, who, when she wasn’t sitting on her eggs, would be perched on one of the peaks close to the nest, or soaring high in the sky. The other lesser queens tended to use the lower peaks. The peak that the Mage chose was empty when they arrived, but female dragons were riding the updrafts around the towering central peak. He couldn’t see any males.

“The Queen’s nest is in that cave down there,” said the Mage, pointing, “but she’s not there at the moment.”

He knew that because there was no coming and going at the cave mouth, and a few immature queens were actually wandering around on the shelf in front of the cave.

Suddenly there was a “whump” and a huge white dragon landed on the ridge next to them. The Queen ducked her head in greeting. The Mage was startled by her arrival, but Mouse was not. He simply returned the head ducking greeting.

“How did he know to do that?” wondered the Mage.

The Queen spread her wings to catch the sun and settled down on the peak. Mouse ran up to her and scratched her lowered head, and she opened her mouth in a dragon smile. The little boy was not scared by the huge mouth full of teeth which could have crushed him in an instant. The Queen accepted the little boy's scratches for a while, then she gently nudged him back towards the Mage. When he was out of the way, she took off, stepping over the edge and catching the updraft and disappearing into the sky.

"She's nice," said Mouse. "Oh, hullo, Great Gran."

The Boffin had appeared on the peak with them just as the Queen disappeared. "Wow. An audience with the Queen. You're honoured, Mouse."

"What's an audience?"

"A meeting with an important person."

"Oh, like the man with the eggs?"

"Yeah, I guess so," laughed the Boffin.

The Mage was used to Mouse's cheerful outlook on life, so he was taken aback when Mouse appeared one day sobbing.

"What's up, Mouse? What's wrong?"

"Jasper. He's too cold. Help me, Great Grandpa."

"He's too cold? Where is he?"

"There." Mouse gestured.

"Take me there," said the Mage grasping Mouse's hand. He'd learned his lesson from previous happenings. Mouse knew where "there" was and could reliably take you there.

"There" turned out to be close to Mouse's house. There was a smell of burning and small flames around a small curled up body. Mouse ran up to the small body and put his hand on it.

"Jasper, wake up. Wake up."

As the Mage approached Jasper, he could feel the heat coming off the small body. Jasper was about the size of Mouse, but his skin was red,

like red leather, and he had pointed ears, and a small pointed tail. Mouse seemed unaffected by the blast of heat coming from the small body.

The Mage muttered a few spells and scooped up Jasper and ran to Mouse's house.

"George," he called. "GEORGE!!"

Mouse's mother came running out. "What is it? Oh!"

"George, have you got a bonfire set up anywhere? Somewhere where you are going to burn stuff?"

"Sure, round here."

George rushed around the corner and the Mage and Mouse followed. There was a pile of stuff which could not be salvaged piled up in not far from the barns. The Mage hit it with a fire ball and it started to burn. George threw some logs and branches on to the fire and the Mage lay Jasper gently in the middle of the fire. The small body started to stir a little.

"What is it?" said George. "I mean, what is he?"

The Mage brushed a few embers off his clothes. "I think he's a small devil. An imp, I guess. Maybe just a child. Apparently he's a friend of Mouse's."

"A friend of Mouse's?"

"His name's Jasper. I've no idea how he got here. Or how come he's a friend of Mouse."

"He stepped," said Mouse. "From his home. It's hot there."

"Can you take us there, Mouse? Have you been there before?"

"Yeah. It's Jasper's home. Hold hands."

George and the Mage joined hands and the Mage grabbed Mouse's. Mouse reached into the depths of the fire and grabbed Jasper's hand. Then he stepped.

Mouse said "Wake up, Jasper."

Jasper stirred. "That's cold," he said.

"You forgot this," said Mouse, and he laid his hand on Jasper's and looked into his eyes.

"Oh, yeah!" said Jasper, sheepishly.

The Mage looked around. The atmosphere, the rocks, everything glowed with heat. Some rocks flowed and fountains of fire erupted from everywhere. But everywhere there was life. Fire plants grew in minutes up to the height of small trees and then collapsed, showering the area in small purple pebbles which were probably seeds. Small animals bounded from glowing rock to glowing rock and other creatures swam in the scarlet streams of flowing lava. The Mage adjusted his vision to the infrared and low end of the normal human visible range, and gasped at the beauty of the view. The reds became blues and greens, and all the other colours shifted to match, the colours from the infrared becoming visible to the Mage as yellows, oranges and reds.

“What are you doing with my son?”

A female demon had appeared in front of them.

“It’s Jasper’s Mum,” said Mouse.

“Mouse? Is that you? Who are these people?”

“We brought Jasper back, ma’am. He was suffering from the cold in our space. Mouse’s space.” said the Mage.

“The cold? Mouse’s space?” Jasper’s Mum was confused.

Jasper was recovering. “They helped me, Mum, when I was cold. Mouse told me, but I forgot.”

“You’d better come home. It’s not far,” said Jasper’s Mum. “Call me Amy. It’s short for Amethyst.”

They walked along with Jasper and his Mum to their home. It was square space with no roof, of course. It would just melt. The walls were melting in places and Amy pushed and patted them into place. In one corner there was a small pool of lava. As the Mage watched, it bulged and a large bubble erupted and burst, and fumes, contained by the walls, spread through the house. He had no idea what it was for. Demon air conditioning, maybe?

“Excuse me for asking,” said Jasper’s Mum, Amy, “but you are not from here, are you? You are Cold People, aren’t you?”

She gestured for them to sit down on the couch. It looked like it was made from modelling clay, but supported the Mage’s weight, and it felt like he was sitting on soft cushions.

“No, we are not from around here. Do you know about other ‘spaces’ or ‘worlds’?”

Amy pulled and pushed a big lump of lava across from them and formed her own seat in the soft lava. The Mage didn’t see how she stiffened it, but suddenly it was a seat.

“Oh, yes, but we don’t go there very often. Those spaces are mostly too cold. Is that what happened to Jasper? Oh thank you for bringing him back! He’s been everything to me since I changed from being his father to being his mother.”

Jasper climbed onto her lap, sucked his thumb and went to sleep.

“You were his father and now you are his mother?” asked George, cuddling Mouse.

“Yes. Why do you ask?”

“Oh, we don’t change. We stay as mother or father for ever.”

Amy looked slightly shocked. “Oh. We say ‘Everything melts sooner or later.’ Jasper’s birth mother grew wings and changed to being a male, then flew off to the mountains. We were expecting it, of course. My wings melted and I became his mother. When I have a baby, I will lay the egg and will look after the baby at first, then I will grow wings and fly to the mountains. The new baby’s father will lose his wings and become its mother.”

“In our space, things are much colder, as you know. Things do not usually melt, though they do wear away,” said the Mage. “We grow our babies inside the mother, which probably sounds bizarre to you. And when the baby is born, which I won’t describe, the mother and the father usually look after the child for almost twenty years, and even after that the child often still lives with its mother and father.”

Amy was fascinated. “Wow, that’s strange. Well, to me it is, I mean. I’d like to hear more, sometime, if you’d like to come back. Are you Mouse’s mother and father then?”

The Mage said “George is Mouse’s mother, but I’m George’s father’s father. I’d like to bring my wife to visit you some time, Amy. I’d love to come back and have a good look around. I think that she will like it too. By the way, didn’t you realize that Mouse was a Cold Person?”

“Well, no. He looked just like Jasper. He looks different now. As you said, like a Cold Person.”

“Ah,” said the Mage, nodding. “Well, we have to go. We’re glad to meet you, happy to have rescued Jasper.”

And with that, George, Mouse, and the Mage said goodbye and stepped back to their home space.

“So, Jasper forgot to, or couldn’t change to a Cold Person shape, when he visited?” said the Boffin.

“Yes, it looks like it. Would you like to go and visit Jasper and Amy then?”

“Sure. It looks like fun. She sounds nice. That sex change thing is odd. Well, odd to us, anyway.”

The Boffin pressed some buttons on her hand held device, and she was a young dapper male. She pointed it at the Mage, and he was a statuesque female.

“Mmmm,” said the Mage in a deep contralto. “Interesting. But I prefer us as we usually are.”

He cancelled the effects of the Boffin’s device with a gesture.

The Boffin kissed him. “Yeah, much better. When are we going to see Amy, then?”

Jasper and Mouse used to come around together after that. Jasper had the appearance of a normal little boy, and didn’t set fire to his surroundings now, so he’d obviously remembered what Mouse had taught him about shape changing.

Still, the plants didn’t like Jasper and curled up their leaves if he came near. Gardening was off the agenda, if he came over.

The Mage mostly took the two boys to his laboratory, but even there things would suddenly boil or iron filings would spontaneously ignite if Jasper was around. The Mage didn’t mind, but kept the two boys away from anything important or dangerous. He also took notes, because you could never tell what might be useful at a later date.

He learned a lot from Jasper about very dry hot substances, which of course he passed on to the Boffin. There were no real sands in Jasper's space and no water too, and things melted rather than eroded. There were powdery soils which persisted for a while, but they were more like ashes than sands, and were soon absorbed and melted.

The Mage decided that he would suggest to the Boffin that she send one of her students to study demon space. They could learn a lot about high temperature materials there. And he would send one of his own too, to learn about the society there. Yes, that was a good idea. The demons could send students of theirs to his home space if they wanted to. He'd help them pass as humans and introduce them to people who would answer their questions for them.

Mouse continued to come round, but Jasper stopped coming eventually.

"Where's Jasper?" asked the Mage one day. "Are you two still friends?"

"Yeah, sort of. He's going to school now."

"Ah. So he doesn't have time."

"Yeah, and he has his school friends. They don't want to come here."

"I see. What do you think of that, Mouse?"

"Well, I've got my school friends too."

Mouse continued to weed the Mage's herb bed.

"Jasper's Mum said 'Everything melts sooner or later.'" said Mouse, and he gave his Great Grandad a hug.

Mouse's visits started to tail off after that, and he wasn't interested in the charms and potions, but still liked helping the Mage in the garden. One day the Mage realized that he hadn't seen Mouse in a long time. He sighed.

Then one day he was baking some bread, which he and the Boffin sometimes did. Usually they bought their bread these days, but he liked to keep his hand in. He noticed that he was being watched by a small girl with rather messy hair.

"Doris, daughter of Shirley and John?" he said.

"I'm Doh," she agreed. "What're you doing, Great Gramps?"

“Well, Doh, I’m making bread, and this is called ‘dough’ like you, funnily enough. I have to leave it to rise for a bit, so why don’t we go and check in with your Mum?”

“OK. She’s looking for me everywhere.” Doh indicated the whole wide world.

“Hold hands then, and take me back home.”

“Can I come back and watch?”

“If your Mum says that it is OK. Here, have a biscuit.”

Doh held the Mage’s hand and suddenly the room was empty.

Twins

Every story should have at least one heroine and this story has two. They were twins, and their names were Eirwen and Rhoslyn. As is usual in stories like this, they lived with their widowed mother in a cottage on the edge of the forest. They weren't poor, as their farm brought in a fair income, and their beloved father had invested wisely before he had died, but they weren't rich either.

Wen and Rhos were fine looking girls, and all the local boys were interested in them. But the girls didn't fancy any of them that much, though they remained on good terms with all the young people in the neighbourhood.

"Are you waiting for your princes to come, girls?" asked one local joker. "The chance of one prince to happen along is small. For two of them to appear here is astronomically unlikely!" The girls laughed along with him.

They were happy girls, and their mother was happy enough too. The only slightly unpleasant aspect of their lives was their neighbour, Trev, who wanted to expand his farm to include theirs. He had tried many times to buy it from their mother, and when that hadn't worked, he'd been trying to woo the widow.

"Why do you put up with him, Mum?" asked Wen asked one time when he had just left. "He's horrible."

"Wen, please don't call people horrible," said their Mum. "It's true that I don't like him much, but we have to get along with him. He's our neighbour."

"Only because he stole the farm," said Rhos.

"That's only rumour and gossip, Rhos. If there had been any wrongdoing, I'm sure that it would have been found out."

Rhos and Wen were not so confident. It was rumoured that when their original neighbour had died there were two other claimants for the property, cousins of the farmer, but they never appeared, and after a lengthy legal battle the farm became the property of Trev, who was a distant relative of the farmer.

Rhos was a dark-haired girl and more outgoing than Wen. She excelled in sports and was particularly expert with the crossbow. Wen was blonde and more inclined to be bookish, though she could outdistance her sister easily in the swimming pool. They did well at school, with Wen usually a little ahead of her sister. They were well liked within their group of friends.

If they had a peculiarity, it was that they liked to go into the forest together, collecting firewood, browsing for berries and nuts, if it was the right season, and watching all the forest animals as they went about their forest business. Of course all their friends visited the forest as well, but none of them loved it like Rhos and Wen.

That's how they met the two bears. They were sitting on an outcrop of rock overlooking a clearing when the two young bear cubs tumbled into the clearing followed by their mother. The mother bear dug at the roots of a tree and found something tasty that she passed on to the cubs. One of the cubs sniffed a bee, which buzzed around the cub's head, and surprised, he rolled over backwards. It was so comical that the girls, watching from above, couldn't help but quietly laugh.

The mother bear heard them, turned and stood on her back legs and sniffed. She looked directly at them, and the girls knew that she had seen and scented them. What now? They got ready to run. But, the mother bear ignored them, and continued teaching the cubs how to survive.

"She noticed us," breathed Rhos.

"Yeah, and ignored us!"

The girls often saw the bears after that, and sometimes watched them from a distance. If the mother bear spotted them, she would stand on her hind legs and growl at them in the usual bear way.

"Mwoooaah!"

But it didn't seem threatening, and then she would continue with whatever it was she was doing. Rhos and Wen were able to watch the bear family for a while.

One day in late summer, Rhos and Wen saw the mother bear heading for the ridge, which was the first of the foothills of the mountains. She was alone.

“I wonder what’s happened to the cubs,” said Rhos.

“Perhaps she’s taught them all that she can?” suggested Wen. “We’ll have to look out for them.”

It turned out that they didn’t have to. At the back of their cottage there was a disused stable in which they used to keep all the garden tools. Night was falling and Rhos was returning the yard rake to the stable. She put it in its rack, and then jumped when she heard a snuffle behind her. She turned, and the two bear cubs were cuddled up together in the horse stall, fast asleep. Rhos quietly walked past them to the door.

“Mum, Wen, come and look at this!” she cried as she rushed into the house.

The three of them looked at the bears asleep in their stable. They had ripped apart a hay bale that had been in the stall and had spread it on the ground and made themselves a comfy bed. While they watched one of them yawned and scratched his ear.

They retreated to the house.

“Well how about that! What are we going to do?”

They set up some pots and pans outside the door, which would give them a warning if the bears came near the house, and they all cocked their crossbows and kept them handy, just in case.

“What’s up, Mum? You look worried, and it’s not about the bears.” asked Wen.

“Trev has signed up all the spare labourers for the harvest. I don’t know how we’re going get the harvest done.”

“Oh, no! I knew he was mean. I didn’t know how mean.”

“Now dear. He’s perfectly entitled to hire all the men he needs.”

“I know that, Mum, but it is still nasty of him.”

They spent a restless night because of the bears in the stable and the problems with the harvest, but in the morning the bears had gone. What was more surprising was that their truck was piled high with their produce from the harvest.

“What? Who did this? Girls, do you know anything about this? That’s at least half of a field’s worth of produce.”

“No Mum. We’ve no ideas, have we?” Rhos looked at Wen who shook her head.

“Maybe the bears were magic bears?” Joked Wen.

“Well, that’s unlikely,” said their Mum. But she frowned a little. “Can you girls go and ask Trev if his men did it? I’m going to drive the truck to the market.”

“OK, Mum,” said Wen, though she didn’t look forward to doing it.

She and Rhos trudged through the fields onto Trev’s farm. There was a harvesting machine slowly making its way down the rows of crops, and they could hear Trev’s voice round the far side.

“Come on, get this thing moving faster. I want to finish this field by tonight.”

The arm of his coat caught on a projection of the machine, and he was dragged along by it. Fortunately for him, it wasn’t a moving part, but he was stumbling, and looked likely to fall under the wheels.

Rhos and Wen screamed and waved at the machine operator, who couldn’t see what had happened, and the machine stuttered to a halt.

“What did you do that for?” yelled Trev. “They’re going slow enough all ready!”

He managed to free himself from the machine.

“You were caught on the machine! You could have been killed!”

Trev shrugged it off. “I’d have got free eventually. Back to work guys! No more breaks. What am I paying you for? Not to sit around chatting.”

He stomped off.

“Trev, Trev,” called Wen. “Please, we want to ask you something.”

Trev stopped irritably.

“What is it? Be quick, I’m busy!”

“Mum wants to know if any of your men harvested our top field for us. Did they?”

“What? You think I’d pay my men to work on your fields? The idea is preposterous.”

He left them standing there as he strode off. They walked back to their farm past the harvesting machine.

“Should’ve let me run him over, if you ask me,” said the machine operator, with a chuckle, as they walked past.

Wen and Rhos smiled, but didn’t comment. One result of this incident was that two of the men hired by Trev gave up working for him and came over to work on their Mum’s farm.

That evening, just as the sun was going down, Wen crept out to the stable on a hunch. At first, she thought she was wrong, but then one of the shadows moved and sighed. They were back!

She rushed back to the house.

“Mum, Rhos, the bears are back! They’re back!”

“Well, fancy that. Best put the pots and pans back tonight, though I don’t think that they will cause trouble,” said their Mum. She put two apples down in the stable doorway.

The next morning the bears had gone and so had the apples. Again the truck was full of produce.

“Maybe they really are magic bears,” said their Mum, unbelievably. “Anyway, I’ll take the truck in again. You two can clean out the stable and give them some fresh straw. It whiffs a bit in here now.”

“Maybe they like it like that,” said Rhos, half seriously. She saw her Mum’s expression. “OK, Mum. We’ll do it.”

So they cleared out the stables, which did smell a bit, but not too unpleasantly, and spread some fresh straw in case the bears came back again. They also left two apples.

And so it continued. The bears spent the nights in the stables and in the mornings the truck was ready to go to the market. The girls sneaked looks at the bears and each came to have her favourite. One had a scar on the back of its left paw and the other had a small nick in its right ear. Rhos liked the one with the scar on its paw, while Wen liked the one with the nick in its ear.

One morning, Rhos and Wen were hitching a lift with their Mum into town for school. They'd been running late and missed the bus. Suddenly a man stepped out into the road without looking and Rhos and Wen both yelled at their mother to stop. It was Trev.

Their Mum stood on the brakes, and they skidded to a halt mere millimetres from Trev. Astoundingly he blamed them for the near miss.

“Why don't you drive more carefully! You nearly hit me!” He stomped off.

“Why don't you look where you are going you ungrateful...”

“Rhos!”

“OK, but this is the second time that we've saved his life, I reckon!”

“Rhos!”

“OK, Mum. OK!”

Their Mum had a deep think about Trev, the bears, and the mysterious harvesting of their crops. She went into the stable and felt a distinct tingle when she was in the horse stall. Ah! She decided to contact a friend she knew from a long time ago.

Eventually her message reached the Mage, and he went in search of the Boffin.

“I've just had a message from a friend,” he said. “She wants my advice. It's not urgent. Do you want to come along?”

“Mmm. Where does she live? I've nothing on at the moment.”

The Mage told her.

“Yeah, that's a nice place, isn't it. There's that huge lake down there. Why don't we drive down?”

So the Mage replied to the message and told Rhos and Wen's Mum when to expect them, and they packed the car and set off.

“Who is she, this friend of yours? A witch or a wizard?”

“Elsie? She's what is called a hedge witch. She's got the powers, but not a lot of training. Uses the powers as little as possible. She was a student of mine once, but although she was getting good marks, she

didn't have the enthusiasm for study. She left to get married and had twin baby girls. You'll love them. One dark haired and one fair haired."

He had a sudden thought. "Oh, but they'll be grown girls by now. It's been a while. Her husband unfortunately died of the flu the year of the big epidemic. It was such a shame."

Rhos, Wen and their mother became accustomed to the bears sleeping in their stable and sometimes went out and watched them while they were sleeping. They didn't wake even when Rhos and Wen peeked over the partition into their stall. Once or twice the humans caught a glimpse of the bears arriving in the evening or leaving in the early morning.

Their mother pondered the matter of the bears and the mysterious harvest. It couldn't be coincidence that the bears had arrived at the same time that the harvests started. And another thing. She knew bears and firstly, male bears never stayed together like these two did, and secondly, they usually stayed well clear of humans. Besides, she felt a certain tingle when she was close to them, and that meant that they had something magical about them. Never mind. The Prof could take a look when he arrived.

It turned out that others had seen the bears, and one day when Rhos and Wen were walking along the riverbank they spotted Trev on a dinghy in the middle of the stream, slowly drifting with the current. When he saw the girls, he called out to them.

"Throw me a rope. I've lost my paddles."

"OK, Trev, I'll fetch one," called Rhos and ran off. Fortunately this stretch of river was slow flowing but it did end in some nasty rapids.

Rhos came back a minutes later with the rope, her crossbow and a light line. She shot the light line across the river into a tree and Trev grabbed it and stopped his drift downstream. It wasn't strong enough for the girls to pull him in, so they tried to throw the heavier rope to him, but they couldn't reach the boat with their casts.

"I'm going to have to swim out to him," said Wen, and grabbed the end of the rope.

She removed her boots and dived into the water. She swam out to Trev's dinghy and gave him the rope. Rhos bent the other end around a tree and started to pull the dinghy into the bank. Slowly, with Wen pushing the dinghy, she managed to bring it to the bank.

Trev was not happy.

"It's all your fault," he accused. "If you'd kept those trees trimmed I wouldn't have lost my oars in them."

This was unjustified, of course. His patch of bank was much worse than theirs, with fallen trees jutting into the river, and his cattle had turned a part of the bank into a smelly slippery mess.

"What were you doing on the river, Trev?" asked Rhos. She'd not expected thanks.

"I was looking for those bears that are hanging around. I want to get them before they start raiding my livestock and stealing the apples off my trees. I thought I might see something of them from the river."

The girls must have shown by their reactions that they knew something.

"Wait. What do you know, you two? Do you know where they are sleeping?"

"No, of course not," lied Rhos.

"We're just scared. Our house is right next to the forest. Come on, Rhos. I need to get dry," said Wen.

Trev watched them suspiciously as they walked away.

"Do you think he believed us?" said Rhos.

"Not for a minute," said Wen.

"I hope the bears stay away tonight," said Rhos, without much hope.

A bit later that afternoon the Mage and the Boffin arrived. They'd had to stop a couple of times to top up the boiler with water of course, and once they had stopped to fill the tender with more wood from a roadside vendor. Then they stopped at a nice little cafe for lunch, but they had made good time, and steamed up to the farm to be greeted by Rhos, Wen and their Mum.

The Boffin removed her hat and goggles and looked at the view. Behind the farm the forest swept up to the ridge, and beyond that, other ridges grew higher and bluer, until, in the far distance, the mountains were bare rocks, skirted by the high forest, dark with pines. A scattering of snow dotted the highest peaks.

“Oh, wow, it’s beautiful here!”

“Thank you. I’m Elsie and this is Rhos and Wen. Please come in and have a cup of tea.”

“So, Elsie,” said the Mage, after they had settled down to tea and scones, “you think you have a problem?”

“Yes, Prof. We have two bears coming round and sleeping in our stables. There’s something magical about them.”

The Boffin raised her eyebrows at the Mage. She was usually the one who was called “Prof”. He ignored her.

Elsie told them about the bears and the tingle she felt from them. Rhos and Wen were surprised, as they hadn’t heard their Mum talk about magic before.

“Would they be there now?” asked the Boffin.

“Yes, probably. Let’s go and see,” said Elsie.

At that moment there was a terrific noise from outside, and they all rushed out. Trev and one of his men were in their yard. They were standing with raised crossbows aiming into the stable.

“Stay back! We’ve got the bears cornered in here. They will never steal my sheep again!”

A lot happened very quickly. Trev and his man let loose their bolts, Rhos and Wen yelled “NO!” and the Boffin appeared in the doorway of the stable holding the two crossbow bolts.

“We’ll have none of that,” she snapped. “You’ve not lost any sheep to bears, Trev.”

“How did you know my name?” gasped Trev.

“That doesn’t matter. What do you know about these bears?”

“Nothing!”

The Boffin looked at the Mage who was consulting a scrying globe. “He’s lying.”

“Get lost,” the Boffin said to Trev’s man, who shot off as if the bears were chasing him.

“Try again, Trev.”

The bears were sitting quietly inside the stable, in the stall.

Trev seemed to shrink. “They’re my nephews. Twin sons of my sister. She died and their father remarried. They moved away, and he thought that they didn’t keep in contact because they didn’t get on with his new wife. But the real reason was because they had been changed into bears.”

“Because they would have inherited the farm?”

“Yes. I bought a curse from a rogue wizard and changed them into bear cubs, then I set them free in the forest.”

The Mage muttered about the rogue wizard. He’d try to track him down later, but it was a long time ago.

“But they are only young bears. Two or three years old,” said Wen.

“If I had to guess, I’d say that the mother bear had some cubs who died, so Trev’s nephews became the cubs, and she raised them. That sort of thing is known to happen, but I’m only guessing. Time doesn’t mean much to charms and curses,” said the Mage.

“Yes,” said the Boffin. “The question is, what will remove the curse?”

“It’s usually the death of the person who laid the curse,” said the Mage.

“What if I let the bears loose on you, Trev? Oh, that’s why you tried to kill them. You were afraid that they would kill you,” said the Boffin. She looked furious.

“My dear,” said the Mage. “Hold on. There is another way. If the person who laid the curse wants to, they can voluntarily remove the curse. All it needs is for them to say that the curse is lifted.”

“Yes, I saw the bears in the forest,” said Trev, “and somehow knew them immediately. How does that work? Never mind. I thought that they would come after me, so I decided to hunt them down. I’m sorry. I had no idea that it would come to this. ‘The curse is lifted’.”

The Mage lifted his hand and everything stopped. Everyone except for him, the Boffin, Elsie, and Trev stood like statues.

“What are we going to do about you, Trev?” asked the Mage. “What does the story hold for you in the future?”

“Me? There wouldn’t be a story without me. There’s no story like this without a villain, is there? I’ll not apologize for that! But nobody actually chooses to be the villain, do they? It’s thrust on them. I’d like to stop being the villain, now, if it’s possible.”

“He’s got a point. What do you think, Elsie?”

“I think it’s up to Trev. The story can develop either way.”

“Very shrewd, Elsie. You would have made an excellent witch,” said the Mage.

“Well, maybe. But I’m happy with how my life turned out, even though I lost my husband too early. But we’d better get those lads some clothes.”

The Mage lowered his hand, and briefly chaos reigned as the boys covered themselves with bits of tarpaulin and handfuls of straw, and the girls tried to peek into the stables.

“Come on, girls, let’s go back to the house and get them some clothes,” said their Mum, pushing them firmly away.

Trev approached the boys who looked at him suspiciously.

“Look, I’m so sorry, boys,” he said. “I’ve done you a terrible wrong. We’ll go to the lawyer in the morning and straighten things out. Then I’ll leave.”

“Look, boys, why don’t you keep Trev around?” said the Mage. “He knows how to run a farm and you don’t. I think you’ll find that he will be a great help.”

The boys were suspicious at first, but eventually they decided to ask Trev to stay around, at least for a while.

The Boffin and the Mage stayed with Elsie and the two girls for a few days. It seemed to the Boffin that the two boys found reasons to visit every day, and she smiled to herself. Rhos always seemed to be near the

boy with the scar on his hand, while Wen and the boy with the nick in his ear were seldom far apart.

Trev also dropped by a couple of times, and he was intent on building bridges. Rhos and Wen were suspicious at first, but he was much more relaxed and friendly than he was before, and the girls were surprised to find that they soon quite liked him.

When it was time to leave, the Boffin filled up the boiler of the car with water and topped up the small tank in the tender, and gratefully accepted a load of wood for the fire and the bunkers on the tender. She lit the boiler the hard way, with sticks and paper, and while they were waiting for the steam pressure to build, they said their goodbyes.

The Boffin and the Mage trundled down the road towards the lake and the Boffin linked arms with the Mage who was manning the tiller.

“That was a good outcome,” she said.

“Yes, wasn’t it? Though you do like your theatrics, don’t you. Catching the bolts in mid-air indeed!”

“I didn’t have a lot of choice! There was no time! What about you, stopping time like that?”

“That was just to give Trev a chance, and he took it. I think most of his irritability and meanness sprang from guilt. He’ll be a good man, in the end, I think.”

“Yeah. It was the two boys who did the harvest, then?”

“Or bears. It’s hard to tell. Yes, they were touched by magic of course, and picked up on Elsie’s worries. It was a sort of thank you for letting them sleep in the barn. They were able to do the harvest so long as no one saw them. Otherwise, they’d revert to bear, I think.”

“But they didn’t know how to run a farm.”

“Yeah, that’s true. The magic helped, of course. Now they will have to learn to farm without the help of magic. Trev will help, I’m sure.”

He paused and stroked his beard. “There’s one thing that I don’t understand though. Why Elsie’s barn?”

She kissed him. “Think about it, my dear. They were not really bears. They were really boys.”

“Oh, of course. It’s obvious. Silly me! And they met the two girls in the forest when they were bears, didn’t they?”

They rounded a bend in the road and the lake opened out in front of them.

It was just an arm of the big lake. The trees edging the lake were mostly conifers, but there were stands of deciduous trees scattered here and there between them, and as the year was turning to autumn, many of them showed brilliant yellows and reds. The trees were reflected in the still lake waters which also reflected the deep blue of the sky and the white of the clouds. Behind the stands of trees by the lake, the forest swept up and over the ridges, showing more of the green of the conifers, and less of the bright colours of the deciduous trees the higher up one looked.

Much higher up, the ridges marched to the mountains. The rocky shoulders of the giant peaks of the range shrugged off the trees, showing their rocky shoulders. Early season snows carpeted the sheltered gulleys and gulches, while the highest peaks were still clear this early in the year.

Down at the lake level, some of the lake’s borders, where the rivers and streams reached the lake, were muddy havens for reeds and rushes. In other places the forest stopped two or three metres from the water and grass borders separated the forest from the stony or gravelly beaches. Small gnarled shrubs and bushes struggled in the thin soils, and the occasional flowering plants painted bright spots and patches here and there. Small succulent plants sported bright yellow stars in mats of fleshy green.

In the stonier areas, little lizard creatures skittered from here to there, hiding under the sprawling mats of tough little plants from the herons and other wading birds for whom they would be a nice snack. The birds stalked the shores and the shallows, looking for lizards, small fresh water crustaceans and fish, and insects. Kingfishers perched on dead branches, swooping down on small fishes or crabs in the shallows, returning to their perches with their prey if they were successful. A toss and a flip and a swallow and the fish or crab was gone.

Further out on the water, ducks upended and dabbled in the mud, or quacked and cruised busily about. In contrast, flocks of swans swam around cruised regally, bending their long necks and dipping their heads

into the water. Out where the arm of the lake opened into the lake proper, a flock of geese flew in from somewhere, and drew arrow shaped intersecting wakes on the placid surface.

“Oh, that’s beautiful,” said the Boffin. “And not a trace of science or magic involved.”

The Mage put his arm around his wife, and she hugged him back.

“Oh, but there is magic there. And beneath the surface, science is involved,” said the Mage. “Can’t you feel it? Science and magic are the foundation of everything, and it is glorious!”

“You’re right, Prof. Completely right!”

Mouse and Moth

Mouse was an eighteen-year-old boy, tall and built like an athlete. His skin was as dark as ebony, and his dark hair curled tightly close to his head. He didn't know it, but many girls of his age group sighed as he passed by.

He was popular, friendly, cheerful, and modest. People would often find themselves smiling after chatting with him.

Sometimes his peers talked of the time before the school ball, when the group had been chatting about who was going with whom. Lillian, who suffered from medical issues which meant that she had to use crutches, was sitting quietly with the group, listening to the discussion.

Mouse had suddenly said "Lillian, who are you going with?"

Lillian was flustered. "Er, no one has asked me."

"Me neither. Let's go together, shall we?"

"S-sure," said Lillian.

When one of his friends had complimented him on his gesture later, Mouse genuinely didn't understand.

"What do you mean?" he had asked. "Lillian's a friend, and she needed a partner and so did I. It makes sense."

And to Mouse, it did. So Mouse took Lillian to the ball, and he treated her like a princess for the day. But, even though Mouse gave her a kiss, Lillian was under no illusions, and neither were any of the other girls that Mouse kissed from time to time. Mouse was attentive, thoughtful, kind, but there was no romance in his kisses. Still, it was impossible to dislike Mouse.

Some months after the ball, Mouse crept quietly through the wood, and Mouse could move so quietly that small creatures didn't hear him passing. He stopped for a minute and listened. At first, he could only hear the distant call of birds. Then he heard it! The sound that he was listening for; the sound that had caught his attention a moment before. He moved quietly towards it.

He bent some twigs to one side and saw the girl. She wasn't a local girl. Mouse would have known if she was, of course. The girl was as light as Mouse was dark, and she had long hair, so blond as to be nearly white. Her skin was pale, lightly freckled, and to Mouse it seemed to glow. She had the lithe look of a gymnast or a dancer, and not the frail look that sometimes goes with a very light skin. She sat on a stone by the side of the stream and dangled one bare foot into the water. One knee was bent, and she leant her arm on it. Her head was tilted and her hair fell away from her cheek. Mouse yearned to stroke it. Her clothes were soft and flowing, as light as she was herself.

She was, it appeared to Mouse, singing to herself. At times there were soft, bell-like notes, at times, soft trills. Here a warble, there a liquid coo. Mouse was entranced.

Then Mouse shifted and a twig snapped. The song stopped and the girl tensed. She looked directly towards Mouse, and seemed ready to run.

Mouse bent the branch away and said "Don't be afraid. Please."

The girl seemed to sing a phrase. Mouse heard a question in it.

"I'm not going to harm you. Please, don't run away."

He slowly moved from behind the bush, and stopped in the open.

"Who are you?" he asked.

The girl sang a phrase at him, with a question.

Mouse guessed.

"I'm Mouse," he said. "What's your name?"

A fluting and warble, then a clear word. "Mouse?"

Now Mouse's great-grandfather and great-grandmother were the Boffin and the Mage, and Mouse had inherited some Science and some Magic from them. More than a bit in fact. He bent down and enticed a mouse from the undergrowth onto his hand. It wrinkled its nose at the girl and she laughed.

"Mouse" she said, and touched it.

The mouse turned dark and its coat turned curly, a small murine version of Mouse. Mouse laughed.

"And you?" he said, releasing the mouse.

The girl sang a phrase and held up her hand and a moth fluttered down onto it. She showed it to Mouse.

“Moth.” said Mouse. “My turn.”

He touched the moth, and it changed from its drab brown to a brilliant white. Its wings became feathery, diaphanous.

“Moth,” said the girl, laughing.

Just then the sound of voices and breaking branches startled them both. The girl, who Mouse now thought of as Moth tensed. With a “thwap, thwap” wings sprang from her shoulder blades, wings as diaphanous as the moth’s, and she sang a phrase that echoed through the wood.

Crashing through the wood came a huge white stallion. Mouse was startled, but not scared of the beast for some reason. Moth half flew, half jumped onto the stallion’s back. She paused and sang a phrase.

“Mouse” she said clearly, then the stallion took two paces and jumped. Moth and the stallion disappeared.

A pair of Mouse’s friends came stumbling through the wood, and Mouse greeted them cheerfully enough, but his mind was full of Moth, and her mount. In particular, he saw, in his mind’s eye, the pure white spiral horn on the stallion’s head. He didn’t say anything to his friends about Moth and the unicorn.

“A unicorn!” whispered his mind. “Wings!”

This was not as big a shock to him as it would be to you or I, because his great-grandfather and great-grandmother were very special people, and unusual happenings occurred around them all the time. But still, he needed to consult them about Moth. And the unicorn.

Mouse was very fond of his great-grandparents, and when he was young he often escaped from his mother to spend a few hours with them. His mother, Georgina, eventually gave in to the inevitable and gave Mouse a charm that would protect him, and installed a locator device in it that would enable her to find him where ever he was. His great-grandfather, the Mage, topped this up with a spell which made sure that Mouse wouldn’t lose the charm, even if he stepped to other spaces. He still had the charm, on a chain looped around his neck.

The Mage and the Boffin were powerful people but didn't seem it. They lived in a cottage which was roomy, but not enormous. They tended their garden and traded vegetables with their neighbours and frequently visited friends and relations. They went to the market and haggled for eggs.

Sometimes the Boffin was a professor of Science and Maths at the University in the capital. Sometimes the Mage was a leader in the conclaves of Magic. He, too, was sometimes a professor at the University, but of Psychology and matters of the Mind, soft sciences, not his wife's hard science disciplines. Powerful people listened when they spoke, and often asked for their opinions.

The Mage was the focus of Magic and the Boffin was the focus of Science in this "world". The Mage and the Boffin usually referred to it as this "space", and it annoyed the Boffin a little that the young scientists of the day referred to "many worlds of which this is only one".

"A world is round," she said. "A space contains many worlds. There are many spaces. In fact, there are an infinite number of them."

They wielded huge power, but had learned early in their career that the exercise of raw power was seldom effective. So, they avoided the spotlight and most people didn't even know that they existed. They could remove a dictator with a blast of fire, but they had found that the political void would often be filled by someone much worse, or the country in question would collapse into chaos. Besides, they didn't like killing people. If they stopped a war, another would spring up somewhere else. They wryly commented that mankind really liked its wars, and expended their energy in trying to minimize the devastating effects of them.

They favoured the more circumspect methods of wielding their influence. They would visit a dictator and suggest to him that he should change certain aspects of his behaviour. Since they might visit him by bypassing all his defences and walking through his walls, the dictator would generally find reasons to go along with their suggestions.

The Mage and the Boffin didn't just operate in their own space. They frequently travelled to other spaces, near and far, and helped other foci of Magic and Science, many of whom initially had no idea of their powers. Now there was a whole network of special people who spread their influence over myriads of spaces. The Mage and the Boffin were pleased

that, without prompting, these powerful people looked on themselves as being the custodians or guardians of their range of spaces, and not as rulers of them.

Anyone can pass between spaces, which those who know how to call stepping, but most human beings have forgotten how to do it. Sometimes, in times of extreme stress, humans will, more or less accidentally, step between spaces. Now and then the Mage and the Boffin had to rescue people who had accidentally stepped into another space.

All sentient and many semi-sentient beings can step. Notably, dragons can and do step frequently, and the Mage and the Boffin had a great deal of respect for the species. They considered dragons to be sentient.

The dragons had a space, their home space, which the Boffin and the Mage often visited. The Mage and the Boffin even had a shack there, and it was one of their favourite spaces. The dragons welcomed them, but there were no other humans there, and humans, in general, were not welcome in the dragon space. The dragons were courteous to those who stumbled there by mistake, though.

Mouse stepped to his great-grandparents' front door step. He rapped at the door, and at that moment realized that he hadn't visited them for years. He gulped.

The door swung open and the Boffin's voice said, out of the air, "Come in, dear. Come on in."

He entered and shut the door behind him, and spotted the speaker that the Boffin had used to speak to him. Great-gran loved her gadgets! No doubt there was a camera somewhere. He walked through to the kitchen come living room. That's where the Mage and the Boffin were usually to be found when they weren't in the study or the laboratory.

The Boffin hugged and kissed him.

"So nice to see you, Mouse. How long has it been?"

"Don't tease the boy, my dear," said the Mage.

"Er, sorry. I should visit more often," said Mouse.

“Goodness,” said the Boffin. “If every one of our great-grandkids visited as often as they should, we’d never have any time to ourselves! Seriously, Mouse, it’s great to see you.”

“So, who is the girl?” asked the Mage.

“Now who’s teasing him,” said the Boffin. “But, anyway, Mouse, welcome, and how can we help you?”

Mouse laughed. He remembered why he had loved to visit when he was smaller.

“Oh, why did I stop visiting?” he asked.

“Because you had a life to live,” said the Mage. “We understand.”

Mouse accepted the Boffin’s superb cakes, and endured the Mage’s terrible coffee and told his story.

“I met a girl. She has wings. She rides a unicorn.”

“What’s her name?” asked the Mage, not even blinking.

“I call her ‘Moth’. I’ve only met her once.”

“Are you sure she has wings? Are you sure it’s a unicorn?” asked the Boffin.

The Mage snorted.

“Silly question, my dear,” he said. “Would he be here if he wasn’t sure?”

“Yeah, sorry. It’s the sceptic in me talking,” said the Boffin. “Did you talk to her?”

“It’s more like singing,” said Mouse. “It’s like her language is music.”

The Boffin and the Mage looked at one another.

“She has wings?” asked the Mage.

“Yeah. They’re not covered in feathers, like a bird’s. They’re diaphanous, like an insect, and they’re not there all the time. I only saw them when she left. They appeared with a ‘thwap’. A double ‘thwap’ actually.”

“A unicorn?”

“Yeah. She called it, and it came. It was white, pure white, and had a white horn, a spiral horn, on its forehead.”

“Sounds pretty much like a unicorn,” teased the Mage. “So what’s the problem?”

“Oh, I want to know more about her! What is she? Where did she come from? Everything!”

“Would it make any difference, dear Mouse?” asked the Boffin.

“Yes! No! Oh, I see. I guess I want to understand her. I want to know how to get closer to her!”

“You know where she and the unicorn went?”

“Yes, to another space. Somewhere. I couldn’t follow her with my mind!”

The Boffin looked at the Mage. They knew that Mouse stepped with ease and it was very difficult to stop him. He once found the Boffin when she was stuck in a space a long way from home.

“She didn’t want you to know,” said the Boffin. “Otherwise, Mouse, you would have known and followed her.”

Mouse lowered his head.

“Yes, I think so. Of course. And she did it to protect me, I think.”

The Mage looked at the Boffin. Much of their communication wasn’t verbal. And it wasn’t telepathy. They just knew each other incredibly well.

“We think that you met a Fairy,” said the Boffin.

“What? I thought that they were small! I didn’t even know that they were real.”

“No, Fairies are normal human size. Of ‘normal’ human stock even. In ordinary humans the wing thing is suppressed, genetically, but in Fairies it isn’t. Humans have an empathy with horses, and unicorns are a special type of horse and have a special connection with Fairies.”

“What should I do, great-gran?”

“Do you need to ask, dear Mouse? You are going to spend all your time in those woods, aren’t you, trying to see your Moth again? As to what happens if you do see her again, I don’t know. You will have to see, won’t you?”

Mouse nodded. He chatted to his grandparents about the Fairies. His great-grandpa took him to his study, and they browsed through as many scrolls as they could find that dealt with Fairies and unicorns. A lot of it was much darker than Mouse would have thought, with stories of babies being kidnapped by the Fairies, and people being impaled by unicorns. His great-grandpa reassured him that these were, in the main, stories written by people who were not involved in the events mentioned.

“I’ve only met Fairies a few times, and they were friendly, helpful people. We only have one side of the story. I can’t imagine them stealing babies. Could you imagine your Moth stealing a baby?”

“No, never,” said Mouse, thoughtfully, but he had to admit that he didn’t know much about her. He’d only been with her for a few minutes!

“What about the unicorn?”

“I wasn’t afraid of him for some reason, even though he is a big beast. If I’d threatened Moth, I think it would be a different story!”

When they returned to the kitchen, great-gran was cooking supper.

“George called. I told her that you were staying for supper, Mouse. Is that OK with you?”

Mouse grinned. “Yes, thank you.”

His Mum was still checking up on him, after all these years!

After Mouse had stepped back home, the Mage looked at the Boffin. She was leaning against him, her legs curled up on the sofa. His arm was around her.

“Well, that answers one question. Has the situation changed?”

The Boffin took out her favourite device and clicked a button. The white wall opposite turned into a multicoloured swirl.

“Much the same as this morning,” she said. She clicked another button and the swirls died down a bit. Most of the screen was some shade of green, but it was patchy. There was some orange and red.

“Here’s a zoomed view. We now know that the main orange/red area is probably Mouse. It’s deepened a bit. Did you show him the scary stories about the Fairies?”

“Yes, but I really doubt that they are the danger. They’re a secretive, but not a threatening people. In fact, those that I’ve met have been very nice. But it’s a good idea to make him a bit wary. What’s that other red/orange patch do you think?”

The Boffin tilted her head. “See, there’s a connection to Mouse. And the patch is slowly getting closer to Mouse. Maybe it is the Fairies. Or something to do with them.”

The Mage tilted his head too. “I see what you mean. You’re probably right. Can you zoom in on Mouse, my dear?”

“Oh,” said the Boffin after the screen changed. “Look at that! It’s the two of them. Mouse and the Fairy girl, closely orbiting. Well spotted, dear! At least we can see that Mouse is almost certainly going to see her again.”

“Let’s set an alert on them.” He waved his fingers and drew a loop in the air. On the screen a dark line lassoed the double heart of the orange/red area. He gestured and a little alert icon appeared on the loop on the screen.

“That will do,” he said and closed the screen with another gesture. “If that area goes to deep red, we will know. I’ll set it to alert George and Will. And Gremlin and Cam too. This thing may blow up at any time.”

He reminisced. “Remember those bat people, dear?”

“Oh, yes. Hanging upside down in the cave with all the others. The evening swarm. The sound of friends and family. The crunch of a juicy insect and the heavenly juice of a ripe pear. The world seen in reflected sound. Most of the time the joys overrode the horrors of the piles of poo at the bottom of the cave. They were nice people, weren’t they?”

The Mage nodded. “I’m glad that it’s a Fairy.”

The next afternoon, Mouse turned up at the spot where he had met Moth. He was hopeful, but his hopes were dashed. Moth did not appear. He spent an almost sleepless night, and the next day performed his chores listlessly at first. But then pulled himself together, thought a bit, and by the time he was free to return to the wood, he was almost cheerful. He was prepared to wait for days if necessary to see Moth again.

He approached the glade whistling, not really expecting to see Moth there, but there she was! Of course, she had heard him whistling and had turned towards him, ready to run if it wasn't him.

When she saw it was him, she whistled his song back at him, then sang it with a trill.

“That’s much better than I could do, Moth. It’s beautiful.”

She sang something back to him with a laugh. He knew that she understood something of what he said, and he sensed the meaning of some of the things that she said. No, she sang! It didn't seem to matter that they couldn't speak each other's language. They quickly evolved their own sign language. Crossed index fingers meant “no”. Sweeping an index finger in an arch represented the passage of the sun, a “day”. Thumbs up meant “yes”.

But mostly they just walked hand in hand and talked. Mouse loved to listen to her sing her words. He wondered what his less musical words sounded like to her. She seemed to like to listen to him as much as he liked to listen to her. Perhaps it was soothing to her, like a father humming to his child.

They visited a high place. She didn't seem to like the distant city, but loved the height. They dangled their legs over the edge. He wondered about her wings, and gestured at her shoulders. She was silent for so long he thought that he had insulted her somehow. But then she smiled at him and her wings popped out with a distinct “thwap, thwap” noise. She put her hand on his knee. They had crossed a threshold of some sort.

The wings were iridescent, covered in scales the size of the nail on his little finger. The border was white and feathery, reminding him of a feather boa. She moved them slightly, and he could see that she had four wings, not just two.

“Oh, they're beautiful, Moth!” he said.

She smiled again and leaned over and kissed him. Her wings popped back into her shoulders, and he tentatively put his arm round her, and she leaned into the embrace, laughing musically. He kissed her, and she rested her head on his shoulder. They stayed like that for a long time, until the sky started to go dark and the lights started to come on in the distant city. Eventually she sang something and pushed him away playfully and stood up. He stood up too and kissed her.

She held his hand and called. The big unicorn materialized on the ledge with them, and she vaulted and flew onto his back, made the “day” sign, and the thumbs up sign. She would be back tomorrow! The unicorn took two paces and jumped over the ledge, disappearing at the peak of his leap. Mouse gasped and then laughed at himself.

They met almost every day after that. They both hated it when one or the other made the “no” sign and the “day” sign, indicating that it was impossible to meet tomorrow for some reason. But such times were rare.

The day that Mouse first met Moth, he had set out for the woods in the morning, and hadn't returned by late afternoon. George was beginning to wonder where he was and what he was up to, and then suddenly thought of her Grandparents. Her intuition told her to call them. The Boffin reassured her that Mouse was with them and would be staying for supper.

“He's with Grandpa at the moment. Has he said anything to you?” asked the Boffin.

“No, not yet,” said George. “What about?”

Her intuition kicked in again.

“It's a girl, isn't it? He usually tells me everything. But not about the girls.”

The Boffin laughed. George's intuition was legendary, but this wasn't too hard to guess.

“Yes, it's a girl. Moth. She's not just any girl. She's a Fairy.”

“Of course it's a girl,” said George. “Hmm, a Fairy? Trust him! I knew he was up to something. I must tell Will.”

“Yeah, your husband should know, but keep it quiet, dear. You don't want to be swamped by Fairy hunters.”

George laughed. “Sure, Gran. I understand. Not that I know how to find any Fairies!”

Mouse stepped home as quietly as he could, but his mother still heard him.

“Evening, Mouse. Aren't you going to tell us about your day?”

Will, his father, snorted.

“Hi Dad, Mum. I’ve just been with great-grandpa and great-gran. Er, what did they tell you?”

“That you met a girl, her name is Moth, and that she is a Fairy.”

“Ah. Yes. That.”

“So, why keep it a secret from your Mum and Dad?”

“Don’t tease him, dear,” said Will. “Well, not too much. Actually it was a smart move. They know everything about everything, those two.”

Mouse came clean. He told them all about Moth, about how he met her and the unicorn.

After he had gone up to his room, Will looked at George.

“You’re thoughtful, George. Is your intuition playing up again?”

It was one of their little jokes. George answered seriously though.

“Yes, a little. I think things might get exciting round here, and fairly soon. It’s a good thing that his brothers and sisters are staying with my sister for the summer.”

Just then the Mage rang.

“Grandpa! Nice to hear from you. Is this about Mouse?”

“Yes, mainly, George. You know our big chart? The one we use in order to keep an eye on things? Well, a week or so ago some red patches started to build. Then Mouse visited us and told us his story, and some of it fell into place. The main red patch is almost certainly Mouse and Moth, meaning that they are in some sort of danger. That’s pretty clear. There’s another red patch that is slowly approaching and deepening, like a low on a weather chart, and that means trouble of some sort. I’ve set an alert around Mouse and Moth, so we should get some warning. It will alert Will and you, and Gremlin and Cam, as well as us. Meet us at our place if it goes off.”

“Thanks Grandpa. It’s a good idea to alert Mum and Dad too. Mum loves a good scrap!”

“What about you, George? What is your intuition telling you? Anything?”

“Mmm. Let me think. There’s danger there, of course. Moth will be the one who is most affected by whatever it is. Mouse will be quite a bit too. Apart from that, it’s hazy. I can’t tell if we will be needed or not, but it is likely. We’re going to be involved somehow though. Sorry.”

“OK, we’ll have to play it by ear. No need to tell Mouse, I think. Well, goodnight dear. Send our love to Will and all the kids.”

Mouse and Moth spent as much time as possible together. Moth didn’t like the inhabited areas, so they sought out wildernesses and quiet areas. They walked in the mountains, standing on high peaks, walking round dark mountain tarns. Moth dipped a foot in one and laughed at the bite of the cold water.

They walked in green forests, and saw the forest creatures going about their forest lives and didn’t disturb them. The occasional bear sniffed the air and carried on. Moth put her arms around the trees and listened, but couldn’t convey what she heard.

She was fascinated by the beaches, so Mouse guessed she didn’t live near a sea or ocean. She thought the seals were funny and smelly, and once they came across a few penguins, and she giggled at their pompous waddle. She stood for a long time watching the crashing waves, and Mouse was content to stand with her and watch too.

She and Mouse sometimes rode the unicorn at a gallop on the broad pampas, and when they discovered a wide secluded beach they galloped along the strand, partly in the water and out of it. When they stopped for a rest and dismounted, the unicorn, who Mouse thought had been merely tolerating him for Moth’s sake, dipped his horn to him in an obvious gesture of thanks.

“You’re welcome, pal,” said Mouse, dipping his head to the beast. The unicorn wheeled away for a solo run on the beach, prancing and pronking in the shallows and making them laugh, swimming out into the waves and back again, galloping through the shallows much faster than he could with Mouse and Moth aboard, really stretching himself, and enjoying it. He hooked up a clump of seaweed with his horn and threw it into the air, then chased after it. Mouse was really pleased that he was having such a great time.

Mouse got his Grandparents' permission and took Moth to the dragons' space. He could have just stepped there, of course, but it seemed polite to ask their permission first, as it was their special place. Moth and Mouse walked on the beach and admired the unique sun, with its pink halo. They had lunch at the Mage and the Boffin's shack, then Mouse took Moth to a high peak to see the dragons.

For the second time in his life, Mouse was favoured with an audience by the Queen. She landed on the same peak as them, and dipped her head in greeting, and Moth and Mouse dipped their heads to her. To Mouse's surprise Moth extended her wings and flew into the air, and the Queen joined her. The Queen's more powerful wings created turbulence, spinning Moth around in the air.

Moth shrieked, then recovered, and landed. She looked exhilarated and out of breath, and laughed to see the concern on Mouse's face. She said something in her musical language, obviously to reassure him, then dipped her head to the Queen. The Queen bugled, then flew off, catching an updraft and disappearing into the heights. Mouse somehow thought that she seemed amused.

The end when it came was sudden. Moth and Mouse were relaxing by a stream, quite close to Mouse's home. Moth was, as usual, dipping a foot into the water. All of a sudden there was crashing from across the stream, and twenty feet away a creature appeared and roared. Moth screamed and backed away.

The creature sniffed and moved towards them, breaking into a shambling run. Mouse thought of it as a Troll, though it was obviously more aggressive than those usually peaceful beings. It was just a bit taller than Mouse, but built much more solidly.

Moth was shaking like a leaf as the creature reached the edge of the stream. Mouse hit it with a few bolts of energy, as he had learned from his father and mother, but this just slowed the beast. Suddenly the unicorn appeared and galloped past him. He whirled and kicked the creature in the chest with his powerful hind legs, and the beast toppled into the water, stunned. The unicorn spun, leapt into the stream and impaled the beast with his horn. The beast sighed and grasped the

unicorn's horn, but its grip fell away as the unicorn pulled his horn from its body.

Moth, Mouse and the unicorn watched as the body turned into mist and disappeared. Curiously, Mouse thought that it looked relieved as it died. Moth sang an urgent phrase, and the unicorn looked at Mouse and as good as nodded. Mouse and Moth mounted the unicorn and his powerful muscles surged under them as he took two steps and jumped.

The unicorn landed in a woody clearing. Ancient trees surrounded what Mouse thought of as an encampment. It was tidy, but obviously temporary, from the makeshift pigsty to the extended tents. A few ordinary horses were cropping the grass, and chickens strutted around importantly. Children were playing in and around the trees, their wings popping out and in again as they ran along the ground or flew in and out of the branches, or climbed the trees in a more traditional way. A toddler tottered unsteadily along, his wings fluttering as he tried to keep his balance. Mouse and Moth leapt off the unicorn and Moth sang out loudly.

A man came out of one of the tents. He was as slender and as blond as Moth, and he sang out a phrase in a voice that was deeper but no less musical than Moth's. He was so like Moth that Mouse assumed that he was her father. The Fairy looked suspiciously at Mouse, and he and Moth tossed musical phrases at each other.

Moth's father broke off the conversation and shook Mouse by the hand and kissed his cheek. Mouse was surprised but it turned out that this was just a Fairy greeting. Moth and her father then continued their urgent conversation.

Moth's father sang out some urgent sentences and all the adults scurried about, preparing for the attack to come. The children were all sent up into the trees. Some of the Fairies took the babies into one of the tents, and others brought out and checked weapons, mostly crossbows and longbows, though some prepared swords and spears too.

The Mage suddenly started.

"It's begun," he said to the Boffin.

Mouse's parents and grandparents suddenly appeared in their kitchen, looking anxious but determined. They all joined hands.

"Right, let's go," said the Boffin, and they tried to step. Nothing happened.

"We know where Mouse is, but the Fairies have protected their space, remember," said the Mage. "George, you are Mouse's mother. You will have to take us there. You should be able to go to your son, and that should bypass the protection."

George nodded, gathered herself, and stepped them all across the spaces.

For a minute there was complete quiet. Moth's father was about to say something to Moth, when suddenly they could hear crashing in the undergrowth from several directions. Two of the Fairies headed in the direction of one of approaching beasts, with loaded crossbows. There was crash and a swish as the beast stepped on a trap and was captured in a net. One of the Fairies aimed his crossbow carefully at the beast and fired. The beast sighed and relaxed and its body turned to mist and disappeared. The two Fairies retreated to the woody clearing, celebrating.

There were five more of the creatures, and they all avoided the traps that the Fairies had positioned around the camp, and stumbled towards the encampment. Moth's father was directing the defence, assigning targets to the adult Fairies. Older Fairy children swooped and dropped logs and rocks on the creatures, while the younger ones sheltered in the tree tops.

The attack slowed. The Fairies were shooting crossbows and longbows, and these were striking the creatures, but seemed to only slow them down. Then one was stuck right in centre of its chest by an arrow, and it toppled, and its body turned to mist and disappeared. Everyone cheered, but the remaining four creatures pressed on, making it to the verge of the clearing.

Some of the Fairies tried to slow the beasts with swords and spears. While this worked, the archers could not get a clear shot. Someone stuck a spear into one of the beasts, but it ripped out the spear and hit the defender with it. He fell to the ground unconscious. The sow broke out

of the makeshift sty as if the fence was made of matchsticks and hit the beast at full speed behind the knees and it toppled backwards. Two of the Fairies dashed forward to finish it off.

One of the beasts swiped at one of the swooping children and connected. She shrieked and tumbled to the ground, trying to control her fall with her wings. She hit the ground hard and the beast turned towards her. Mouse instantly hit it with bolts of energy, which slowed it, but it still approached the girl on the ground. Mouse ran in and picked up the girl, but tripped over a root. A flash of white passed him as the unicorn galloped to attack the creature. He spun and kicked it in the chest, then spun again and plunged his horn into the creature as it lay on the ground. The body convulsed then turned to mist.

“Thanks, pal,” Mouse said to the unicorn. “I like your methods!”

The unicorn seemed to nod, then raced off to rejoin the battle. Mouse picked up the girl and ran to the defenders, nearly bumping into George.

“Take her to the middle tent,” said his mother, as she hurled blasts at the creatures. “Your Dad is in there tending the wounded. Go!”

Mouse didn’t waste time wondering how George and his Dad came to be there.

“Hi Mum. Hit them in the chest. That knocks them down, and then pierce their heart,” said Mouse, then rushed away with the girl.

In the tent, Mouse’s father, Will, and Mouse’s Grandfather, Cam, who were both doctors, were tending the injured, assisting and assisted by a couple of the Fairy women. There were three seriously wounded Fairies, and others who were not so bad. Mouse handed over the girl to his father and returned to the battle.

It was almost over. His great-grandfather plunged a sword into the last downed beast and it turned to mist and vanished.

“Nasty things,” the Mage said. “They are already dead so you can’t really kill them. A sword to the heart just sends them back to where they came from, but eventually they will be back. Hi, Mouse. Which one is Moth?”

At that moment Moth ran up and put her arm around him. He was surprised that she had a graze on her shoulder. He hadn’t seen her

fighting. She reached up and touched his forehead and it hurt. Now, when had he been hit?

“Moth, this is my great-grandfather,” said Mouse.

“Pleased to meet you, Moth,” said the Mage.

She ran up to him, sang a phrase, and shook his hand and kissed him on the cheek.

“Let’s go and see how everyone is doing,” said the Mage.

Moth’s father was standing outside the tent. The Mage went up to him and shook his hand, and when Moth’s father kissed him on the cheek, the Mage did the same.

“That’s the way they do it here? Hmm.”

He gestured at the tent.

“Can we have a look, please?”

Moth’s father waved him in. Inside, Will was using the Boffin’s device to diagnose the injured.

“Hi, Granddad,” he said. “We’ve got two bad ones, several minor scrapes and bashes, and the girl with the broken wing. Hi, Mouse. I hear you rescued her. Well done. Oh, and one who didn’t make it, unfortunately.”

Mouse and Moth went around checking on people. Granny Gremlin had a split lip and a graze on her head. She was a bit embarrassed about the split lip.

“I dropped my spear, which stuck in the ground, then I ran onto it and it hit me in the lip.”

One of the Fairies mimed the whole thing, and sang a musical phrase, and everyone laughed.

“Huh!” she said. “It’s just my luck that they were all watching.”

George was untouched. “I didn’t really get into it. I knocked one down and one of the Fairies finished it off. It’s pretty creepy the way they just disappear! What did you do to your head, son?”

“I think I hit it when I fell over.”

George laughed.

“You are as bad as your Granny! That was when you were rescuing the girl, wasn’t it?”

All the defenders gathered outside the tent. Mouse’s family were thanked profusely by everyone. It didn’t matter that they couldn’t speak the same language. The message got through.

Four of the Fairies took a stretcher into the tent and brought out the body of the dead Fairy. Everyone, Fairies and Mouse’s family too, lined up to give him a kiss on the cheek, then the stretcher party stepped to somewhere else. For some reason the unicorn went with them.

“What happens now?” asked George interested.

Moth guessed the sense of the question, and did the “day” sign three times, then grabbed George and Mouse by the hand and bowed her head.

“Oh, three days, then there is a funeral.”

The two worst casualties were made comfortable. They would recover, given rest and time. The young girl with the broken wing was a more difficult problem, as it could cripple her. Will carefully inspected the wing, and consulted with the Boffin and the Mage.

“The bones aren’t completely broken. It’s a greenstick fracture and the bone might heal bent. I think I can straighten it, but I can’t splint it.”

“I can fix it in place with a spell,” said the Mage, “but it will only last three days. She will have to sleep upright though.”

“I can accelerate the healing a little,” said the Boffin. “Three days should be enough.”

“We think that we can fix the wing,” said Will to the girl’s mother. “Shall we do it?”

In spite of the language problem, the girl’s mother understood. She nodded.

Will got Mouse to feign sleep lying down. He felt silly and Moth giggled. Will signed “no” with crossed index fingers and shook his head seriously for good measure. Then Will got Mouse to sit up and pretend to sleep, and Moth laughed out loud. Will gave a thumbs up signal, nodded vigorously, and made the “day” sign three times. Just to make sure, Moth, who was used to using signs with Mouse, repeated the instructions in the Fairies’ musical language.

“Pain relief,” Will requested and the Boffin used her device on the wing.

Will carefully straightened the wing and by the time he had got it straight enough, he was sweating from the exertion and from the tension. Too much pressure and it would snap.

“Fix it, please,” he asked urgently, and the Mage ran his hand down the bone, his fingers glowing.

“Hmm,” the Mage commented. “The bone is not too stressed. The fix may hold for longer than three days. Can you do the acceleration, now, my dear?”

The Boffin ran her device up and down the bone.

“I think you are right. The wing is actually in quite good shape. Young bones! Acceleration done.”

They all relaxed. With a bit more play-acting and Moth’s help they conveyed the idea that the girl should be careful with the wing for a month or so, and the mother carried the girl off to tend to her.

While they had been working on the girl, the Fairies had set up a meal for their allies on some tables that they had carried out of their tents. Of course, the Boffin could not be shown up, so she reached back home and brought back some of the Mage’s bread, Gremlin’s spicy sauce and George’s pies, three family favourites. The Fairies brought out some wine and everyone settled down to enjoy the party.

While the adults were busy, eating and drinking and trying to understand one another, Moth and Mouse slipped away. Moth was sad about something, but Mouse couldn’t work it out. She signed something about “day” and then “no”, then “day”, “day” “day”. In the end she stopped trying to convey the idea to him and kissed him.

By this time they were back in his home space, sitting in their favourite spot, near the pool where they had first met. They kissed and cuddled for some time, and then she lay back on the blanket and pulled him down to her.

Mouse woke slowly to the sound of Moth singing. He sat up and saw her sitting on the stone, dangling her foot in the water as always. She heard him move and smiled a little sadly at him. He stood up and stretched, and

she came and hugged him. They kissed. Mouse picked up the blanket and Moth called the unicorn. He crashed through the woods and then stopped partly out of the undergrowth. Moth extended her wings, but to Mouse's ear, the sound was different, somehow.

The unicorn galloped out the undergrowth and veered across the stream. In two steps he had gone.

“He's never done that before! What's wrong with him? Oh, Moth, your wings!”

Moth's wings were no longer bright. The sheen had dulled and one or two of the scales fluttered off as he looked. The fluffy edge was peeling away in tatters. Moth twitched her wings and a little shower of scales dropped to the ground, and one of her lower wings seemed to be misaligned somehow.

Moth sobbed. Then she looked in the direction that the unicorn had gone and shook her wings again. She grabbed Mouse and held him tight. She kissed him and tears were running down her face.

“Mouse,” she said, then she turned and jumped over the stream, disappearing as she did so. Mouse tried to follow, but his way was blocked.

He stayed in the woods all day, stumbling around trying to find a way to follow her. At times, he called her name. At other times, he just sobbed. Tears filled his eyes and he walked into things. Now and then he got angry at her and screamed. Then he sobbed his apologies. All the time, he searched and probed.

George came looking for her son. She found him at the top of the cliff where Moth had first shown him her wings, alternately sobbing and calling her name. George put her arms around him and hugged him until he calmed down a little.

“Why did she leave me, Mum? Why?” sobbed her eighteen year old son. “Why?”

“I think we'd better go and see your great-grandpa and great-gran,” she said.

She pulled him to his feet and hugged him as they stepped.

“What on earth is wrong? Mouse? George?” asked the Boffin.

“Moth has gone, Gran. Mouse is a wreck.”

The Boffin gave Mouse a small pill, and used one of the Mage’s calming charms. The Mage came in.

“What on earth?” he said.

The medications started to kick in, and Mouse started to calm down. He felt tired and heavy.

“Tell us what happened, Mouse. What went on last night?”

“It was this morning,” said Mouse. “Moth called the unicorn, and he came, but he ran off and stepped. He’d never done that before! Then Moth’s wings, her lovely wings, oh, they started to break up. The scales fell off and the edges were peeling away. Then Moth kissed me, and she was crying, and she stepped and I couldn’t follow. I searched and searched and probed. I couldn’t get through!”

“Ah,” said the Mage. “Mouse, do you remember all those scrolls we looked at about the Fairies? Don’t you remember the bit about the unicorns?”

“That when a Fairy child becomes an adult, a unicorn won’t let them ride it any more? Oh!”

It dawned on Mouse that he was partly responsible for what had happened.

“What about her wings?”

“There was one scroll, maybe we didn’t refer to it earlier, which said that when a Fairy child becomes an adult, they also lose their wings. If you think about it, Mouse, none of the adults flew, did they, even while battling the beasts? I’m so sorry Mouse.”

Mouse was silent, thinking things over.

“I think that she left to protect you, Mouse,” said the Boffin. “You and her family. And us for that matter, maybe.”

“What?”

“Those things, those beasts that chased you. We don’t know why, but they are hunting the Fairies, and the Fairies obviously move fairly frequently to keep ahead of them. You saw their camp. As soon as the creatures found Moth, they found her family. She couldn’t stay with you,

because they would return, find her, and through her, find her family. You couldn't go with her, because you couldn't be a Fairy, and you would be under threat from the creatures, just like the Fairies. I believe that they would be able to trace us, through you, and we could be in danger too. She's a very strong and courageous young woman. I'm glad to have met her."

Mouse nodded.

"I think that she was trying to tell me. The previous evening. She was signing and I wasn't getting it. No more tomorrows. It had to end. I think I was maybe misunderstanding on purpose. What do I do now?"

"Get on with your life. She has given you a chance at a life, without her. Remember her and honour her."

"Without her," Mouse muttered.

Mouse tried, and mostly succeeded in getting on with his life. He still went out into the woods, still tried to step to the Fairies' space, and one day he succeeded.

But the clearing was empty, the few marks where the Fairy camp had been fading away. He found a broken tent peg, and a few fallen fence poles where the pigsty had been. New grass had already started to reclaim the squares where the tents used to be. He probed around in nearby spaces, but got no hint as to where the Fairies had gone. He returned thoughtfully, and told his mother, and she hugged him like he was a baby. His visits to the woods tapered off.

His social life picked up again, and he started to date girls, but, disappointingly for them, they just remained friends with him. George looked on and wondered. Then his friend Andy got married to Mouse's sister, Jen, and things changed.

Rebecca, or Becca as she was known, was one of Andy's cousins, so she was invited to the wedding. Mouse was introduced to her by Andy, and there was instant deep chemistry between them. They spent the evening chatting and dancing. They forgot everyone else. She had long brown hair, and her skin was light brown. George was pleased because Mouse had previously favoured blonde girls with pale skin who reminded George a little too much of Moth.

George liked Becca, She was bright, cheerful and friendly. Nothing seemed to worry her, and she brought Mouse out of his shell. She was fun to be around, and Mouse and Becca quickly became a couple.

Mouse and Becca walked trails and climbed mountains. They swam in blue seas. They visited big cities and small villages. Museums and theatres. Mouse found that he was thinking less and less of Moth. At first, he felt that he was being disloyal, but eventually, he reasoned that Moth had given him a second chance at life, and he should take it. He wasn't being disloyal. He was honouring her wishes, in a way, by moving on.

Mouse came to his mother.

“Mum, I know you like Becca.”

It wasn't a question, and George waited.

“I think I want to marry her,” he continued.

“Oh, that's wonderful dear. Why tell me? When are you going to ask her?”

“Soon.”

“What about Moth? Have you told her about Moth?”

She guessed that that was what was troubling him. Her intuition was twitching, but it was obvious.

“No. Should I?” he asked. “It was so long ago now.”

He looked everywhere but at his mother.

“Mouse, the fact that we are having this conversation tells me that you should.”

Mouse pondered that, then got up and kissed her. Then he wandered off.

“Boys!” thought George.

Becca and Mouse got married within the year and George was a grandmother about a year later. Mouse's daughter was just like her mother, brown skin and dark straight hair. About three years later their son was born, a miniature copy of Mouse. George consulted her

intuition, but couldn't tell if there was another baby on the horizon, which frustrated her immensely.

Mouse was wandering through the woods, ironically looking for a tree. The specific tree he was looking for was a walnut tree that he had harvested nuts from in previous years, but the tree was proving elusive. He'd forgotten exactly where it was, and was beginning to think that it had fallen in a storm or something.

Then he heard the singing, and his mind flashed back ten years. Moth?

He realized that he was close to their favourite clearing, and headed towards it. It was Moth! No longer the teenage Fairy who had captivated him, but a beautiful full-grown Fairy woman. As he broke into the clearing, she turned.

"Mouse?" she said, and spoke a sentence in her melodic language.

"Yes, it's me, Moth. How have you been?"

Yes, she still looked beautiful, but now she looked mature, in the prime of her life, late twenties. The same Moth, but different. She stood up and came to him, and he put his arms around her. He kissed her and it was different. He still loved her. She still had a piece of his heart, but without the spark that had been there before. The spark now belonged to Becca.

She laughed and found a sandy bit of ground. She drew two lines on the ground and then three shorter ones. Mouse was puzzled for a second, then the penny dropped. He drew two lines on the ground and two short ones. She smiled and clapped and put her hand on his shoulder. She drew two circles around the sets of lines, made the "day" sign, then pointed at sun in the sky. Mouse gave her a thumbs up. Tomorrow, same time. Bring the family. OK.

When Mouse got home, he found Becca.

"We're going on a picnic, tomorrow, all of us. I want you to meet someone."

"What?" said Becca, surprised. Mouse never did this. He planned things.

He'd gone off to start looking for the picnic gear, but came back and kissed her.

"You'll see."

Mouse became nervous as they walked into the wood. What if Becca didn't like Moth. Or Moth's husband. Or vice versa. He shushed himself. The Fairy family were there already sitting on a blanket, and when they saw Mouse and Becca they stood up.

"Moth?" said Becca, shocked, and Mouse nodded.

Becca didn't hesitate. She went straight to Moth and hugged and kissed her, then she moved on to Moth's husband and hugged him too.

Moth gestured at her kids. The two youngest were both girls, blond and fair skinned like their parents and about the same ages as Mouse and Becca's two kids, maybe a shade younger.

Becca sucked in her breath and said "Mouse. Look at her son."

Mouse was shocked. Her son was dark skinned, curly haired, and handsome. He was, of course, about ten years old. Mouse's husband introduced him with a musical phrase and Mouse greeted the boy with a Fairy handshake and kiss on the cheek.

The Fairy pointed again at the boy and sang the phrase again, and then said clearly, "Mouse".

Becca said "Oh! They named him the Fairy equivalent of Mouse!"

Moth introduced her husband to Mouse, and they greeted each other in the Fairy way, with a handshake and a kiss on the cheek. Moth's husband sang a musical phrase and pointed to himself. Mouse tried to sing the phrase but muddled it totally. Moth's husband, laughed, pointed at himself, and sang another phrase, ending in a clear "Joe". Mouse smiled wryly and said "Joe". Joe clapped him on the shoulder and nodded, laughing.

After the introductions they all sat down, and the older three kids started to play in the stream. Mouse heard the familiar "thwap, thwap" now and then as Moth's oldest daughter and Moth's son opened their wings as they played in the stream, carrying small boulders to make dams.

“Oh, that’s beautiful,” said Becca, looking at the wings. She passed her baby son over to Moth to cuddle, and helped Moth’s youngest daughter to stand as she tottered on the uneven surface. The toddler opened her wings with a tiny “thwap, thwap” and used them to try to maintain balance. Moth and her husband were ecstatic.

“First time?” said Becca, and they nodded, obviously correctly guessing what she had asked.

The two families shared their picnics. Moth and Joe were intrigued by the pickled eggs that Mouse and Becca had brought along, and Mouse and Becca loved the sweet and sour pie that Moth and Joe had brought. Moth’s little daughter sang a musical “Uh-oh!” when she accidentally stood on a plate and tipped its content onto the ground. Everyone laughed. The older kids browsed the food on offer and got thoroughly muddy and wet in the stream.

Later, Mouse sipped the last of the Fairy wine that Moth and Joe had brought and looked around. He was feeling thoroughly relaxed. Moth’s oldest, the ten-year old was asleep with his head on Becca’s lap. Becca was gently stroking his black hair. Moth was holding the baby again, and he was fascinated by her, waving his arms and bouncing in her embrace. The two older girls were curled up between Moth and her husband, chatting away, each in their own language.

“Where’s the toddler?” he asked urgently.

Becca laughed. “Asleep in your lap, dear!”

“Oh!”

They all laughed at him, including Moth and her husband when they understood his mistake.

Joe stood up and helped his wife up, and she hugged and kissed him. Moth said something in warbles and bell like notes, and he replied.

“I think that they are going,” said Mouse. “We’d better go too, I think.”

Both families packed up the remains of the picnic and gathered up their respective kids.

Becca said wistfully, “I would have loved to have seen the unicorn.”

Mouse mimed a unicorn's horn on his head to Moth, and she and Joe exchanged a musical phrase or two. She turned and called, and the unicorn came trotting through the undergrowth walking carefully. He knew that kids were around. He softly nosed Moth's three children, then, inquiringly, Mouse's little daughter and finally Mouse's son, who Becca was carrying. Then he dipped his horn to Mouse.

"Nice to see you again, too, pal," said Mouse, dipping his head.

Moth lifted her son on to the unicorn's back and put her oldest daughter in front of him. Joe gave Mouse and Becca a hug and stepped back home with the unicorn. It was the first time that Mouse had seen the unicorn step like that. Usually he jumped. But apparently not with young kids on board.

Moth kissed and hugged Becca and Mouse, and spoke one of her musical phrases.

Mouse guessed that she said something like "Nice to see you again. Be careful and look after yourselves."

He replied "And you too."

Moth stepped home with her toddler, and Mouse and Becca were left standing in the empty clearing, holding their kids. They walked slowly home.

"Did you try to see where they went?" asked Becca.

Mouse shook his head. "No. There was no point."

He paused. "I'm so lucky to find two women to love me."

Becca looked at him.

"Mouse, my dear, there are hundreds of women who would be glad to fall in love with you!"

Mouse smiled and slid his arm around her waist. He was modest, but not unobservant. "Yes, maybe. But there are hundreds of men out there who would be glad to fall in love with you, Becca. I know it. I'm lucky that none of them ever caught your eye."

"We're both lucky then," said Becca, "so it evens out."

"Maybe, but what I mean is, I've fallen in love twice, with two wonderful women. When I was with Moth, I couldn't imagine life without her. Then she took herself away from me, which was incredibly

brave of her. I thought that I would die, even after great-gran explained why she had done it. Then after a time most of the hurt went away, but still left the love. And regret. Then I met you, and fell in love with you. The regret mostly faded away.”

He kissed her. Their five-year old, who he was carrying made a kiss face, so he kissed her too.

“Mwah! When I met Moth yesterday I wondered, feared even, that it would change things for us. That should have been answer enough for me. I kissed her. I had to, and discovered that I still loved her, after a fashion. But I didn’t want to be with her. I wanted to be with you.”

Becca said “Mouse, you are most honest person I know. I love you for it. Not many men would tell their wife that they had just kissed another woman, and still loved her!”

Mouse laughed. “And only a wonderful wife would understand. I love you, Becca!”

“I love you, dear Mouse.”

They walked home as the sun set.

When they heard the news of the picnic from George, who got it from Becca, the Mage and the Boffin settled down comfortably on the sofa to discuss it, she with her legs tucked up, he with his arm around her as usual.

“Moth had to have known that it couldn’t last,” said the Boffin. “When she and Mouse first met.”

“Really, dear?” said the Mage. “She was a teenage girl, same age as Mouse. She probably didn’t even think about it. If she did, she’d believe, as they all do, that love was forever and it would find a way. She believed that until the first monster found them, I think, and only then did she know, really know, that it couldn’t last.”

The Boffin nodded. “Yes, you are right. I was wondering if she knew that it had to end, and if she truly loved Mouse. Silly really. I saw them both together, after the battle.”

The Mage nodded. “That’s your rational side talking, my dear. ‘She knew it would end, therefore she was just playing with him.’ But your

emotional side knows better. She really did love him. I'm certain. So brave. When she realized she took him off so that they could be alone together for the last time."

"So romantic," said the Boffin. "Do you think that there are other groups of Fairies out there? With each group being chased by their own group of monsters?"

"Hmm, you and your logical mind, my dear. Well, I've met other Fairies, and they didn't belong to that group, but I didn't visit them at home, so I don't know if it is the same for them as it is for this group. I was thinking along the same lines as you, so I consulted the scrolls, and they are inconclusive."

"Mmm," said the Boffin. "If they are an isolated group... Three families? ...then they have a problem. In-breeding."

"I see where you are going with this, dear. You could be right, even if they do have contact with other Fairy groups. Now and then, maybe frequently, a Fairy girl or boy falls in love with a non-Fairy girl or boy, and a child is born, and if the baby is a Fairy, the Fairy families get a dose of non-Fairy genes. Of course, there's the small matter of the distinct possibility of a Fairy baby being born to a non-Fairy girl and vice versa."

"Baby snatching Fairies, and babies found on doorsteps."

"Yes! Of course. Thank you, my dear. I think I will write up a scroll for the next conclave. A case study of Mouse and Moth, without names of course, and our speculations on the events."

"You're welcome," said the Boffin, smugly. "Don't forget to credit me!"

The Man in the Mountain

The Mage found the Boffin in her laboratory. She was wearing a pair of goggles with dark lenses, and “Goggles!” was written in large letters on the whiteboard near the door, so the Mage grabbed a pair from the rack and put them on. Bright blue beams of light were being emitted by small black boxes. The beams were then reflected off flat mirrors at various angles and finally disappeared into several targets. She was peering into a microscope and slowly adjusting a knurled knob.

“Hullo dear,” she said as she wrote a number into her workbook. “How was Arthur?”

The Mage didn’t ask her what she was doing. She would tell him if she thought that he would be interested. Besides, while he could usually follow her explanations, it might take a while.

“Oh, he’s not so good. I don’t think that it will be long. The head wound is healing, somewhat, but the damage is deeper in his head, and it is not all physical. I don’t think that he has a will to live.”

The Boffin sighed. “Yes, he’s not been the same since that business with Gwen and Lance. Have any of his old friends been to see him?”

“A few. Not many. Nimmy dropped by while I was there. Some are dead and the others are scattered to the ends of the earth. It’s a shame.”

“Yes, it is a shame. It all came tumbling down at the end, didn’t it. Still, we did pretty well for what started off as a drinking club for Arthur and his friends. They, or rather we, because we were a part of it after all, invented the idea of standing up for those who couldn’t stand up for themselves.”

“And the idea of fighting fair, too. But of course the concepts had been around for ages. We merely codified them.”

She sighed. “It was all a bit idealistic, wasn’t it? It was too much to expect it to last. All those big egos, both men and women. I include ourselves in that too.”

“Yes, we didn’t help, did we? But you were right about Gwen. It was a mistake for Arthur to marry her. He was a bit harsh, banning you, though.”

She kissed him. “You’re biased. It was obvious to me what she was like, but I had to open my big mouth, didn’t I? Poor Gwen. She just couldn’t help herself, could she? She couldn’t resist a pretty face. We were actually good friends until Arthur married her, and I got banned.”

“Yes, I know. I remember you alternately raving at her and sympathizing with her. Then Lance came along and that was it. Everything started to fall apart, and the squabbles and fights started.”

“Has he said anything about going home? To the Isle, I mean. I know that at one time he intended to return there at the end.”

“Actually, yes, it is the one thing that he is fixated on. He wants to go upriver in his barge. But that sank years ago.”

The Boffin considered. “We could do something about that. I’ll work on it right away. It will probably take a week.”

“How about three days?”

“Ah. OK. I didn’t realize that it was that urgent. I think that I can do it by then, if I hurry. Drat it! My experiment was just getting interesting! Still, I can return to it later. After all, it’s not a good fit for this era anyway.”

Ben trudged into the mine and came up to the rack of tools. He selected a pickaxe, a shovel and a few other tools, and dropped them into the cart and pushed it squeaking into the depths. He passed the mark at two kilometres in and reflected that the mine had ended there when he had started to work in it. The fixed lighting still ended there.

Ben trudged another hundred metres or so into the dark, lighting the way with his headlamp. The Boss would probably extend the fixed lighting soon, when he judged that it was necessary. The wheels on the cart squeaked rhythmically along the narrow rails until it hit the blocks on the end. Ben stood up and stretched his back, his helmet almost scraping the roof of the mine. He hung his hand lamp on the hook that someone had banged into the rock, but kept his helmet light on.

Ben started to fill the small cart with rubble. Whoever was down here last, probably Karl, had broken quite a bit of rock and Ben’s first job was to clear the fallen rock and transport it outside. Then he could break some more rock and make a few more trips outside. He preferred to

break rock, as did all the miners, but he got paid by the cart load of rubble and for other specific tasks, so there was a trade off. Most miners split their time fifty-fifty between breaking rock and the other tasks.

When he had filled the cart, he pushed it out of the mine. It was slightly downhill, which helped. After two kilometres and more of pushing the cart he reached the entrance and tipped out the load on to the conveyor. The cart was like a large pivoting bucket on wheels, nicely balanced to make emptying easy, but secured by a pin while it was full. As he went back into the mine, Ben made a mark on his chalk board so that he could be paid for his load.

Then he pushed the cart all the way back into the mine. He hoped that the Boss would get an engine or even a rope and pulley system installed soon. The mine needed it. When only one person was working, as was usually the case in their small mine, a lot of time was wasted pushing carts in and out of the mine.

Ben filled the cart twice more and pushed it out of the mine before he decided to take a break. He returned to the working face of the mine, and selected a rock to sit on. He unwrapped the lunch that his wife had made for him, then he relaxed and listened. The older miners said that you could tell a lot about a mine by the sounds it made.

No mine is entirely quiet. Sometimes there are clicks and tinkles, like a shard of rock falling in the distance, but sometimes there are louder cracks and bangs, which cause even experienced miners to pause for a second.

Then there are sounds which are continuous, and sound like the wind, or snakes hissing, or even people talking quietly in the distance. There's the knocking, as if someone else was using a pickaxe in the mine, somewhere in the distance. Experienced miners would say that it was the wind, and that sound travels a long way in a mine and gets distorted. Then they would start to noisily shift rubble or break rocks.

Ben was used to the occasional sounds in the mine. He had a theory that the mind expects noise, and when it doesn't perceive any noise, it imagines noise to fill the gap. Well, he'd more likely just say, "It comes from inside, when nothing is coming from outside." So he wasn't too surprised when the giggling started. Eventually, though, he became

convinced that the giggling was not inside his head, but was real, coming from somewhere in the mine.

He slowly moved his head until he could see over the little cart. What he saw caused him to gasp. He thought that he saw two stocky children, standing in the middle of the tunnel at the point where the fixed lighting stopped. At this distance he couldn't make out much detail, but the two figures were obviously having a discussion, waving their arms at one another, giggling all the time.

When they heard him gasp, they broke off and looked at him, then ran sideways and disappeared. Ben was shocked and scared, and slowly made his way up the mine to where the figures had disappeared. As he thought, there was no cross passage at that point. Just bare unbroken rock. There was not even any of the stacked up rubble filling that the miners called "gobbing".

Ben put his ear to the rock but only heard the echo of his own heartbeat. He swallowed and considered his options. He needed his job and if he walked out, he would have great difficulty getting another one. He wondered if he had imagined it all. As he calmed down his heartbeat slowed and it all seemed silly. Had he imagined it?

He warily returned to his job and filled and emptied his cart until his shift was up. He heard no more giggles, and saw no more apparitions. Because of the scare, he had not had time to break any rock, so he would have to apologize to Andy who was on the next shift. Fortunately he had caught up with his quota of cart loads. He pushed his cart out of the mine, giving the walls a hard look at the point where he had seen the giggling figures.

He signed off and passed Andy as he reached the gate. He often overlapped with those coming in, as he conscientiously filled his hours, and maybe a bit more.

"Sorry, Andy, I didn't get to break any rock for you," he said.

"Aye, lad, no problem. Others are worse," said Andy. "You don't often leave me extra stuff to do."

Andy moved towards the mine.

"Er, Andy," said Ben, "Have you ever seen anything strange in the mine?"

Andy paused.

“Strange? What do you mean, lad?”

“Children. Children who giggle.”

Andy looked at him.

“Children? Not small people? Who walk into walls? Walk with me, lad.”

Ben followed Andy back towards the mine.

“Kobolds, they’re called. Or Bogles. I’ve not seen them in this mine. I’ve seen them once or twice in big mines. Sometimes I thought that I’d imagined them, but other people had mentioned them too. Have you seen them?”

“Yeah,” said Ben. “Are they dangerous?”

“They can be tricky, I’m told. But I’ve never been that close to them. Just take care if you see them again. And don’t forget to bring an extra sandwich!”

With that, Andy signed in and disappeared into the mine with the cart. Just out of sight he checked his lunch box and the charm around his neck.

The Boffin dangled the crane hook over the concrete block and the Mage clicked it onto the eye in the block. Then the Boffin lifted the block and lowered it until the block was in the water. Then she hopped out of the crane and used her favourite instrument to freeze some of the water.

“How’s that, dear?” she asked.

“Yeah, you got it. Try lifting it.”

She returned to the cab of the crane and tried lifting the block and the frozen water around it. It was very heavy, and at first, it refused to move. So the Mage made pushing and pulling movements with his hands, and it came free. The Boffin lifted the block with ice surrounding it and, she knew, Arthur’s barge at the bottom.

“Well done, my dear,” said the Mage. “That’s just about at the limit of your crane, I think. I couldn’t think of any way to move the barge without breaking it more than it was already broken. But now we’ll have to wait for the ice to melt. That will take a while.”

“Yes,” she said. “Do you know any way of speeding up the melting, dear?”

The Mage thought.

“Hm, how’s this?”

A warm breeze blew over the block. The Boffin checked with her instrument.

“Yeah, that should do it in, oh, an hour or so. I’ll just return the crane. I can’t leave it here, it’s such an anachronism!”

When she had returned to crane to its correct era, the Mage looked at her.

“Shall we go and see Arthur?”

“Yes, I think so. It’s time to make peace. Not that I ever wanted to be banned in the first place.”

They held hands and stepped.

The King was sitting up in his bed, while his physician tended to the wound on his head.

“Ah, Morgana!” he said. “Have you come to finish me off?”

“No, your Majesty,” said the Boffin. “I was never your enemy, and I think you know it.”

The King sighed deeply.

“Yes, I know it. Please, old friends, call me Arthur again. You knew me before I was King. Before all this happened.”

“It was fun though, wasn’t it?” said the Boffin, holding his hand. “Why, we even went to Rome to visit the Pope!”

“And told him off to his face! Glorious! Where’s Gwen? Have you seen Gwen?”

His head dropped.

“Oh, I remember. Her and Lance.”

“Don’t worry about it, Arthur. It’s water under the bridge now,” said the Mage.

He moved his hands in a calming spell, but Arthur brushed it aside.

“None of those tricks, please, Merlin!”

“It was just a calming spell, Arthur. But I’ll desist if you wish.”

“Do you have one for my headache?” the monarch asked.

The Mage and the Boffin looked at one another.

“I’ve a potion, Arthur, if you’ll trust me. But it will make you sleep, Sire,” said the Boffin.

Arthur nodded.

“Go ahead.”

She gave him the potion.

“You know, it wasn’t Gwen’s fault. Or Lance’s for that matter. They couldn’t help themselves,” she said.

The King sighed.

“I know, I know. I could have handled it better too. But it wasn’t my fault either. We all reacted according to our natures. You too, my dear Morgana. And you, Merlin, my good friend.”

He settled down in the bed.

“We had such high hopes. Our order of chivalry would rule the country, looking after the common people, ensuring justice, noble standards, routing oppression, and installing order. What happened to that? It all ended in a big brawl, didn’t it? And Mordred was killed and so was I!”

“We couldn’t maintain those high standards, Arthur,” said the Mage. “One hundred and twenty-eight knights in all. Thirty or so around the Table. The noble standards failed when they came up against the petty jealousies and the big personalities around that Round Table. It was a bold idea, Arthur, but it didn’t work.”

But the King was snoring, and they stepped quietly away.

Ben carried an extra sandwich the next time he was on shift. He also carried an extra charm that his wife, a miner’s daughter, had given to him.

“Be careful,” she had said. “Kobolds are tricky.”

“Yes, I know. Andy told me.”

“They took one miner and kept him underground for fifty years. When he returned, all his friends were old men. His wife had remarried and his sons had children of their own.”

Ben had kissed her and headed off to the mine, while his wife watched him go. Then she sighed and turned back to feeding their son.

“It will be all right,” she said to her son, but really to herself.

Ben pushed the cart into the mine as usual. He paused again where the fixed lighting stopped, but the rock was as solid as ever. He even touched it to be sure. He trundled the cart to the end of the track and found that it was almost one rail length from the rock face. Someone had brought in new rails, but there wasn't quite enough room to lay them yet.

He sighed and started to break rock, using appropriate sized chunks to level up the base for the new rails and carrying the rest of the debris to the cart. The trick was to make sure that the tunnel was big enough and was trending slightly upwards. There were tools to measure it, but, like the other miners, Ben rarely used them. He trundled the cart to the outside and tipped its contents onto the conveyor, turned around and pushed it back into the mine.

He tried the new rails in their intended position. Hmm, the base was pretty level, except for one spot, so he got the rock chisel to knock off the high point. It flaked off nicely. He sighed with satisfaction and stood up to stretch his back, but hit his helmet on a low point. He shook his head and rued his silly mistake. Then he heard a giggle. He spun round and the two kobolds were standing just thirty or forty metres away.

“Yeah, I'm pretty silly, aren't I?”

When he spoke, they started and walked sideways into the wall. He sucked his breath in, and his heartbeat raced. This was getting bizarre! He wondered briefly if he was inhaling some strange gas effusing from the mine workings. He went and checked the walls where they had disappeared. He had to. It was, as he expected, solid rock, and he musingly ran his hands over it. He thought that he heard a muffled giggle.

He returned to his work thoughtfully. The kobolds didn't seem a threat. In fact, they seemed scared of him, disappearing when they realized that he had noticed them.

He laid the rails and connected them to the existing rails. With a few taps of the chisel and a bit of packing, he got the rails to lay solidly. He removed the stops and relocated them at the end of the new piece of rail and ran the cart backwards and forwards over it. Almost perfect! A few final touches and the rail laying was complete.

He found a convenient rock and sat down to eat his lunch. When he opened his satchel, he remembered the extra sandwich and picked it out and looked at it. Hmm. He placed it on a little shelf of rock and ate the rest of his lunch.

Then he pushed the cart with the remaining rubble out of the mine. It wasn't as full as he would have liked but it was good enough, and he wanted to see if the kobolds would take the sandwich. He tipped the cart out onto the conveyor and watched his hard work disappear into the grinding shed, then he turned and pushed the cart back into the mine, marking his board as usual and writing "Finished laying rails, supplied by X". He didn't know who was on the previous shift, but the Boss would sort it out.

He was disappointed that the sandwich was still where he left it, so he shrugged and got on with his job. He broke more rock and loaded it into the cart and managed to get another load out and onto the conveyor. He had about another half an hour of his shift to go, so he pushed the cart to the end of the mine and broke some more rock. Suddenly he noticed that the sandwich was gone.

"I hope you enjoyed it," he said, feeling a bit silly.

Did he hear giggles? He wasn't sure. He thoughtfully pushed the cart out of the mine and dumped the load onto the conveyor, and almost forgot to mark his board. He headed for the gate and met Andy going the other way, and they exchanged greetings. Andy didn't mention the kobolds, so neither did he.

The Boffin worked hard over the next two days, cleaning out the barge and making it waterproof. The Mage helped where he could, but this sort of hard physical work didn't match his particular talents. He spent much of his time supplying the materials that the Boffin needed, and locating the skilled workers she needed to help her. Most of them came from their family, their children and grandchildren. Even the smallest wanted to

help. He also slowed time for the Boffin, so that she and her workers could fit in two hours of work for every one hour that passed.

On the first afternoon, she had come to a point where she had to wait for things to set or dry, so they went to see Arthur. He greeted her as if he hadn't seen her the day before.

“Ah, Morgana! Did I rescind your banishment? I don't remember. Or have you come to meddle again?”

“Sire, I haven't come to meddle. I admit, I might have meddled in the past, but that was a long time ago.”

“Hmm,” said the king, suspiciously. “It's too late for all that anyway. If I didn't rescind your banishment, I do it now, old friend.”

He looked around. “Where's Gwen? She was here a moment ago, I'm sure of it.”

He seemed greyer to the Boffin, more tired. She held his hand and tried to give him more energy, but most of it just leaked out of his wound.

“Oh, I remember. Gwen left and went off with Lance. Bad business. I thought that she loved me.”

“She did, Sire, in her way. She did.”

She didn't mention that Gwen had since cut herself off from all her friends, including Lance, and had secluded herself in her castle, back in the lands that she owned. Lance had also isolated himself from his friends, in his own lands. It wasn't a happy time.

“Lance!” grunted the king. “Little worm! I thought he was my friend. Well, he was actually. One of the best. In spite of him stealing my wife!”

He turned to the Boffin.

“You warned me, dear Morgana, and I banned you for it. Silly!”

He slumped exhausted on his pillows. Then he had a burst of energy.

“Merlin! Where's Merlin?”

“I'm here, Sire.”

“Oh, we had fun while it lasted didn't we? Why did it end like this? Remember the Sword in the Stone? When I was just a lad?”

That was a story that they, Arthur, the Mage, and the Boffin, had made up to persuade people that Arthur was the rightful king. It hadn't actually happened. The Mage was uncertain whether Arthur remembered the ruse, or whether he thought that it had actually happened.

The King started, as he noticed the Boffin again.

“Morgana! What are you doing here? I thought that I'd banished you. Never mind. Merlin, have you got anything to let me sleep? You know, I think its time that I returned to the Isle. Please get someone to arrange it. The royal barge.”

The Mage gave him a potion to help him sleep. It was actually prepared by the Boffin, but he didn't tell him that. Arthur dropped into a fitful sleep.

“He's much more muddled today. It can only get worse,” said the Mage.

The Boffin nodded. “It's amazing that he is as coherent as he is.”

They watched for a while, as his servants tended to him without seeming to notice the Mage and the Boffin.

Then the Mage said “We'd better be getting back to the barge.”

Ben got used to the kobolds. They would appear now and again, usually at a distance, giggling to one another, sometimes popping in and out of the rocks. They would take his sandwiches, but he never saw them doing it. He checked with Andy, but he denied ever seeing them.

One day he decided to see what would happen when he didn't leave a sandwich for them. They popped in and out of the rock more than usual, as he filled his cart and pushed it to the entrance to dump his diggings. When he returned one time, though, his lunch satchel was sitting in the middle of the rails with the flap open. His lunch box was open and upside down near the wall, and his drink bottle without the cap was on top of a spoil pile. He searched for the stopper and found it twenty feet away.

He laughed.

“OK, guys, I get the picture. No more messing around. I hope that you enjoyed my lunch as well as your sandwich.”

He was rewarded, he thought, by a faint giggle. He wasn't sure. After that, he made sure to leave out their sandwich every day. Maybe they considered it payment for allowing the humans to mine the mountain. Maybe they considered it their mountain. Ben was quite happy to think of it as theirs, if that is what they wanted.

Then came the cave-in. Ben wasn't an experienced miner, but he knew that the area that they were mining at that moment was unstable. The Boss had got a couple of the experienced miners to shore up the roof and the sides, but Ben could tell that they weren't too happy about the state of the rock.

He was working at the face one day when suddenly there was a crack, and then a rumble, as the roof fell in behind him. A few small boulders bounced in his direction, but fortunately for him the slip did not reach him.

He looked around in shock. He was in a stable section of the mine, but much of the unstable area seemed have fallen in. He started moving some of the rocks, but more just poured into the space that he had made, so he stopped. It was just making his space smaller. Ben noticed that it was getting stuffier, so he guessed that any airflow was minimal.

If he rested he would use up less air, but, because of the unstable rock, any rescuers would have to shore up their diggings as they went. It might take several days to reach him, and he would be dead from asphyxiation by then.

He sat on a rock and put his head in his hands. Oh shit! He thought of his wife and small son, and his tears fell. They would be looked after by the Miners' Union of course, but his wife's best course of action was to marry again. She was a miner's daughter and knew the score. It was fairly common in his dangerous industry, and he hoped that she would make a good choice. His grandma had married again, after his grandpa was killed by a toppling cart, and that had worked out well. In the meantime, he was already finding it difficult to breath.

That's when he heard the giggling. One of the kobolds stepped out of the rock in front of him, a bit more than two metres from him, the closest that they had ever been. Of course! He hadn't left their sandwich out for them yet.

The other kobold walked straight out of the rockfall and the pair stood looking at him. They had greyish wrinkled skin, but Ben himself looked exactly that shade of grey after a day's work. Their outer clothes looked like they were made of leather or strong cloth. Underneath they wore common t-shirts. "Kids' t-shirts? Where did they get those?" he wondered. Suddenly he realized that one of them was female! They were a couple.

"Good day, ma'am, sir. I'm afraid that I'm stuck here. However, I can provide you with a sandwich."

He reached into his satchel and pulled out his extra sandwich, and put it down in front of them. He gestured from the sandwich to the couple.

The two kobolds looked at each other and started giggling to one another.

"Of course, their giggling is their language! Why didn't I spot that before," thought Ben.

He was getting quite light-headed now and everything was zooming in and out. Just as he was about to pass out the kobolds each took one of his hands and stepped towards the rock wall.

"I can't..." he said as they passed through the rock wall, "...walk through rock!"

And so Ben entered the domain of the kobolds.

The Boffin and the Mage looked at the restored barge.

"It doesn't look like much, my dear," said the Mage.

The Boffin didn't take offence. She knew it looked rough, and she knew her husband was just being accurate.

"Yeah, I didn't have much time. But it will float. Can you glam it up a bit?"

The Mage waved a pattern in the air. The barge, with all its patches and fix ups, was suddenly smart, decorated, as good as new.

"How long will that last, dear," asked the Boffin.

"Long enough. About two days."

She laughed.

“About as long as my repairs then! I might have to bail going up the river.”

“Tomorrow, then?”

“Tomorrow.”

The next day the Mage went to see Arthur. The King was propped up in his bed, but everyone was tiptoeing around him. He didn't have long. He was vague about everything, but he recognized the Mage.

“Ah, Merlin. What's going on? Everyone is acting so strange. Am I dying, old friend? Tell me honestly.”

“Yes, Sire. You are dying. May I suggest that we move you to the Isle?”

“We can do that? On my barge? But that sank, years ago.”

“We have got it back, Sire.”

“Call me Arthur, old friend. Where's Morgana? She was here with you yesterday, I think.”

“She'll be along.”

The Mage was astounded. Arthur was surprisingly lucid. His injury may be killing him, but it wasn't completely disabling him, mentally.

“I worry, Merlin, that we will be forgotten in a hundred years or so. Oh, I know you and Morgana will go on, but I mean the Knights, and the Round Table and all our dreams. What do you foresee, old friend?”

“The idea of chivalry will live on. The white flag. The truce while wounded are attended to. Pauses in conflicts for religious holidays. All these will be celebrated, even if they aren't always observed. Sneak attacks will be condemned, weapons which kill and maim indiscriminately will be frowned on. It's actually more than we could have hoped for.”

Arthur nodded.

“Will they remember us?”

“Oh yes, King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table will be remembered. The Sword in the Stone. The Lady of the Lake.”

“And Gwen and Lance? They will have to be remembered, surely? The classic love story, and the poor old cuckolded husband,” said Arthur.

“Yes, Arthur. I’m sorry.”

Arthur nodded again.

“That’s fine, It wouldn’t be the full story without them. The Grail?”

“That will be there. Some of the links to our own story will be lost. It will mostly be about the Knights.”

“Ah. Well it really was about them. The personalities. The conflicts. Even the fist fights. The seductions, the true loves. The loves denied.”

“Shall we move you to the barge, Sire?”

“Sire? That’s a hint, isn’t it? Lead on, Merlin, lead on.”

The Mage signalled to four of the servants, who picked up the King’s bed and carried it outside, onto the quay where the barge was waiting.

“Morgana! Hello my dear. You know that they say you are my half sister! So funny. Not true,” said Arthur from his bed. “Who are your friends?”

“The Lady you know. The Lady of the Lake is going to be a big part of the legend. My other friends, less so. Think of us as an honour escort.”

Arthur’s bed was lowered onto the barge, and the barge turned and headed upstream. The Mage looked back and almost every person who worked or lived at Camelot could be seen on the quay or terraces or hanging out of the windows.

The kobolds’ hands were surprisingly soft and cool to his touch. He held on as he walked with them through solid rock. There seemed to be some sort of surface that they walked on, but it wasn’t even, and the kobolds had to help him as he stumbled through what appeared to him to be a grey fog.

The kobolds helped him along until they stepped into what appeared to him as a light rectangular space, and which turned out to be their home. They let go of his hands and relaxed. Ben looked around at what seemed like a fairly normal sitting room, but scaled for the kobolds’ size. There were couches, kobold size, surrounding what seemed like a column of

rock. It was sitting where a television would be in a human home. There were cupboards and a table and chairs, seemingly made out of rock.

He followed them through to what he thought of as a kitchen crossed with a workshop. It had several machines for crushing and grinding and surfaces to work on. Rock saws, drills, chisels, and other tools hung from the walls.

Two small kobolds raced into the room from another door and one ran into the wall and disappeared. The smaller kobold tried to follow him and hit the wall hard and bounced. She picked herself up and ran up to the female kobold crying. The other young kobold sheepishly returned, and his mother giggled at him furiously, obviously telling him off. Ben guessed that the ability to walk through rock came as a kobold kid grew older. He noticed that the kids had skins which were several shades pinker than the adults' skins.

The male kobold divided up the sandwich that Ben had given him and gave it to the kids. Ben opened his satchel and pulled out his lunch box. He opened it and offered the kobolds his own sandwich. One way or another, he didn't think that he would need it. The male kobold, the father, Ben thought, nodded, took the sandwich, and again divided it up and gave it to the two kobold kids.

“Oh, the sandwiches were for the kids! If I ever get out of this, I'll make sure that there is one for them every day.”

The female kobold opened a cupboard and brought out an orb on a wooden base. It was the only wood that Ben had seen in their home. She put it down and giggled at it and waited. Eventually it giggled back. Ben realized that it was a sort of communication device. He almost laughed. The female kobold giggled at it again, and after a brief conversation carefully picked it up and put it away again. The two kobolds giggled to each other for a moment then held out their hands to Ben. The female kobold giggled seriously at her son.

“We're going out, look after your sister and don't tease her!” guessed Ben. “We're going somewhere else, are we? OK, you're in charge. Are you going to take me out of the mine?”

The two kobolds led Ben into the grey fog again. He began to see more detail in the shadows and was able to walk more easily, and his mind even began to imagine colours. A large light area appeared ahead

and Ben wondered if it was a cave or a mine. It was much larger than anything that he had seen while he had been in the rock with the kobolds, and it had straight edges and square corners. A mine, then?

Ben and the kobolds stepped into the space, and they let go of his hands. Ben saw a space like the interior of a small church, with a dais in the middle. He and the kobolds walked up to it, and he saw that the dais held a dead body. A very dead body, which had dried up and was now flaking away. His breath caused flakes to float into the air. A tomb then. The miner in Ben wondered how long the air would last, but the tomb was quite big, and he didn't feel breathless.

At the foot of the body on the dais stood a very dull metal cup. It was tarnished, dented and dusty. Ben looked carefully at it, but it had no markings on it. It must be special, though, because someone had taken the trouble to put it in this tomb.

The two kobolds sat on a step by the dais, and didn't look like they were going anywhere. The female kobold produced something from her pockets, and they both started eating it. Whatever it was crunched noisily.

Ben looked around. An enormous circle made of wood leant up against the back wall. He took a closer look. It was divided into sections and the sections used to be coloured, but the paint had mostly flaked off. The wood itself was crumbling away and its own weight had crushed the bottom part of the circle.

In one corner there was a pile of something. Ben inspected it and found that the mound was made up of pieces of ancient armour, swords and other weapons. There was little rust, which Ben attributed to the dry atmosphere, but it was all well-used and battered. In another corner there was a pile of fabric, mostly in bad condition, and some poles. Flags and pennants, thought Ben.

In a third corner was a pile of shields. Not only were there shields of the conventional shield shape, but there were round shields, square shields, crescent shaped shields, star shaped shields, and shields with even stranger shapes, all in bad condition, with dents and nicks in them. There were designs on them, but they had faded badly and were indecipherable.

And in the last corner was a book resting on a short column. It was in spotless condition and on its cover was a vivid depiction of a red dragon. Ben eagerly opened it, but he couldn't read what was written there, and in fact the words seemed to shift and even glow as he looked at them. He thoughtfully closed the book and wandered back to the two kobolds.

"I wonder how long we will have to wait?" he said, not expecting an answer, but there was slight change in the air, and he turned around. Two humans were standing there, a tall man in long flowing robes that swept the floor and a woman with dark hair wearing a heavily embroidered dress which also swept the floor. They both emanated power.

The Mage stood at the stern of the barge and watched the curling wake as the barge travelled up the river. The Boffin was pushing the barge along as fast as it had ever travelled. She knew that Arthur wouldn't last much longer.

He turned and went to the deck where the King's bed had been placed. The Boffin was chatting with Arthur and the Lady of the Lake, Nimue, who was holding Arthur's hand.

The King woke from a doze.

"This is the final chapter, then. I'm glad Merlin was able to get the sword back to you, my dear Nimmy."

"It's interesting that the story changes as time passes. In the future, when the story stops changing, it tells that one of your loyal Knights returned the sword," said the Mage.

"Really, Merlin?"

"Yes. The sword is tossed into the Lake and Nimmy catches it from under the surface."

Nimue laughed.

"Well, I can hold my breath for quite a long time, but that's ridiculous," she said.

"Oh, and the story has me chasing after you, Nimmy, and you entrap me in a tree, because you had had enough of me."

They all laughed at that, including the King. They had all known each other a long time, and knew that the story was ridiculous.

“Really,” said Nimue. “How odd. And what does my lovely husband say about that?”

“Sorry, he’s hardly mentioned, Nimmy. And he’s given the wrong name. I’m going to write a book containing the true story. I’m going to relate the real facts and the real events and leave it somewhere. But no one now alive will ever read it.”

“Dear Merlin,” said Nimue, “We’ve all been friends for a long time now. I know that you can foresee the future, but that story seems so silly! I suppose I’m a villain too?”

“In some of the stories, yes, but so are we all, especially my wonderful wife, believe it or not. I can see the future sometimes, it is true, but I see our stories, as they are told in the future, particularly clearly for some reason.”

The King had been dozing and woke up at the end of this.

“I suppose that’s why we are taking this trip, too? For the benefit of the stories. Never mind. I wanted to take it anyway.”

The barge swung round in the current and came alongside the small wharf on the Isle. The King’s bed was carried up towards the small cottage on the Isle.

“Don’t take me inside,” said Arthur. “I’d like to be outside for a while. Under the apple trees.”

The bearers put his bed down in the orchard, and the King sighed. He started to doze off.

“I think that I will have a nap. I wish that Gwen and Lance could have been here,” he said, and those were his final words.

“He’s gone,” announced the Mage. “Please pay your respects to Arthur, our friend and our King. His story, our story, will echo down the ages, as I have told you. I will take his body, and will lay him to rest in a place where he will be undisturbed for centuries. Nevertheless, people will seek his body for as long as his memory exists. I will make the Isle difficult to find, but determined people will find it, and will hope to find his body here. So I will put it somewhere else, somewhere secret.”

The mourners filed past Arthur’s body, and a few of them kissed him on the cheek.

“Nimmy, can you see them back to Camelot, please?” asked the Boffin. “We have to clear up here, and take Arthur to his final resting place. Oh, by the way, the barge will probably sink again in a day or two, so can you leave it where it won’t cause problems, please?”

“Sure,” said Nimue. “I’d better keep its final location a secret too.”

She kissed them both and started herding the other mourners back to the barge.

“I’ve always liked Nimmy,” said the Boffin as the barge moved away from the wharf. “So where were you thinking of laying him to rest?”

“I’m thinking of a mountain. I’m thinking of a tomb hollowed out of the solid rock, with no entrance tunnels.”

“But you still think someone will find him?”

It wasn’t really a question.

“Yes, given enough time. But I’ve got an idea about that.”

She looked at him.

“I think that I can guess.”

The two humans walked forward and the kobolds jumped up and giggled at them, gesturing and waving. The man giggled back at them and the woman threw in a few giggled interjections. Ben felt a bit left out. Then woman turned to him.

“Hullo, what’s your name?”

“B-Ben, ma’am.”

“Hi, Ben, I’m ... Morgana.”

“Morgana.” gasped Ben. “The Morgana? Morgan le Fey? Please don’t enchant me, ma’am! I have a wife and a little boy!”

The Boffin laughed.

“Don’t worry, Ben. Those stories about me are mostly untrue.”

“It’s true. She’s much nicer than the legends about her. I’m Merlin,” said the man.

Ben gasped. He couldn’t speak.

“So, the kobolds tell me that you were trapped in a cave-in. Now the kobolds wouldn’t normally help you, but it seems that you made friends with them. Well done! That’s hard. Kobolds consider humans to be tricky. Anyway, they are the guardians of this tomb. The task has been handed down by the kobolds from father to son for many generations.”

“Arthur,” said Ben, making the connection. “But that was more than a thousand years ago!”

“Yes, Arthur. Now tell me about your mine.”

Ben was coming out of his funk.

“King Arthur, of the Knights of the Round Table. Oh, that’s the Round Table. And that must be the Grail! It looks so ordinary. What is the book? There’s no book in the legends.”

“That’s my book,” said the Mage, giving in. “I wrote in it what actually happened. Everything. Just because of all the silly legends.”

“I tried to read it, but I couldn’t.”

The Mage clicked his fingers and the book floated across to him. He opened it and turned it so that Ben could look at it.

“Oh!” said Ben. “Oh, so that’s what happened.”

He looked at the Boffin.

“Oh!”

The Mage shut the book.

“That’s enough,” he said. “The person who needs the information will be able to read it, but that person has not yet been born. So, what are you mining here? Gold?”

“Yes, gold. We dig out the rock, trying to find the veins of gold, but we send the spoil out and crush it for roads and buildings. It just about pays for the mine. The Boss says we get a small amount of gold out that way as well.”

“Well, your kobold friends tell me that there’s not much gold where you are digging. They’re surprised that you are digging here at all. What is more important is that your diggings are headed straight for this tomb.”

“Oh. The Boss wants to go straight on for another half a kilometre or so.”

The Boffin was sitting with the kobolds and conversing with them in giggles.

“Dear,” she called. “They’ve invited us to meet the kids. Can we?”

“Sure,” said the Mage. “As soon as we are finished here.”

“What are you going to do?” asked Ben.

“Well, it would cause too much fuss to get them to move the mine, so we will have to move the tomb. It’s not a big deal. Simple, even. We’ll move the kobolds too. They told us they want to stay on as guardians.”

“What about me?”

“Ah well, you are going to be found miraculously alive when your colleagues break through the rock fall. Of course, you will have fainted and you won’t remember much. It will seem like a dream. In time, you will think it was a dream.”

Ben considered.

“That’s probably for the best. Can you make it seem like a pleasant dream, sir, or at least not a nightmare?”

The Mage nodded.

“That’s a very good idea. Yes, I think I can do that.”

The Mage made signs with his hands. Of course, he didn’t need the signs, but the charm would work better with the signs.

“My dear, I’m taking Ben back now. You go back to the kobolds’ place and I’ll join you there.”

Ben walked over to the Boffin and the kobolds.

“Ma’am, can you please tell them that it has been nice to know them, and that I will miss them?”

“Sure,” said the Boffin and giggled at the kobolds. They giggled back.

“They wish you ‘good hard rock’. That’s basically their version of ‘good luck’.”

The Mage took Ben’s hand and stepped. The small space behind the rockfall was stuffy, but the Mage waved that away for the time being.

“Your workmates are quite close, Ben, and should break through any minute. A day or two has passed while you were with the kobolds. Time

works differently for them. You will pass out, but I'll stay to make sure everything goes to plan. I'll not be visible though."

"OK," said Ben nervously. "Thanks."

It quickly got stuffy again, and Ben eventually passed out, just as some rock fell and someone shouted "We're through!"

A draft of fresh air struck his face, smelling of rubber and grease, as a hose was thrust through the hole. The sound of a pump could be heard, but Ben was barely conscious. More rock rolled away and someone squeezed through the hole and climbed down to him.

"He's alive! He's alive!"

And another voice, incredulously said "That's not possible!"

The Mage and the Boffin sat on their sofa, in their usual position, the Mage with his arm round her, and the Boffin leaning against him, legs curled up on the seat.

"I liked it when we were Merlin and Morgana," she said. "We could relax and be ourselves for a bit, without hiding our gifts."

"Yes, fun times. Like a big riotous party."

"The legends have a lot more killing in them than I remember. That's what the readers wanted, so the writers put it in, I guess."

"Yeah, there is more partner swapping and infidelity in the legends too. It was mostly just flirting, as I recall, resulting in occasional fisticuffs, to be sure. And there's a lot of treachery in the legends. I remember a lot more loyalty and friendship. But great times. There were a lot of people with power in the one place and time. Us, of course, and Arthur. Nimmy and her friends. Gwen and Lance. Galahad. Mordred, Kay, and Gawain. Many others. All people of power of one sort or another."

"Did we need to move the tomb?" she asked. "We could have just erased it."

"Yes, but then the legend would have died."

She nodded in agreement.

"It's about the book, isn't it? Why is that important?"

“I don’t know,” he said. “All I know is that I had to write the book and someone will come along to read it.”

She trusted his intuition on such matters.

“The person who will read it is not yet born, you said. Will we know when he or she has arrived?”

“I get the impression that we won’t be around at the time.”

“We won’t be around? Oh. Yes, well, I know that we will end sometime, but I don’t often think of it.”

He was silent for a long time.

“Oh, but you do, don’t you, dear.” she said as she kissed him, eyes welling up.

“It’s my gift and curse to see the future, my dear, but I don’t see it all, and I don’t see clearly what I can see, much of the time. I’m not sure that I want to see our end. I do know that we will be glad to go, when we finally go. We will be ready,” he said, and kissed her back.

The End and a New Beginning

The Mage was trimming his beard in the bathroom one day when he knocked over a small bottle. It dropped to the floor and rolled under a small cabinet. He sighed and eschewing the use of magic, knelt down and retrieved it.

He looked at it and frowned. It was a bottle of hair dye. He turned and looked at his reflection in the mirror for a long, long time. Then he went in search of the Boffin.

She was in the kitchen humming to herself, cooking breakfast pancakes for her breakfast. His bowl of muesli was waiting for him. He knew that she would “accidentally” make just one too many pancakes for herself and that he would eat the last one.

He poured himself a coffee from the press and sat down, then he placed the bottle of hair dye on the table. They were so sensitive to each other’s moods that she glanced around, and saw the bottle, but she finished the pancakes, and then sat down.

“Ah! Well then.” was all she said.

“How long?”

“About a month.”

“Mmm. I’ve always sported a bit of grey, so I didn’t notice. When I found your bottle I looked at myself, and I could see it.”

“Yeah. So, what now?”

“It’s been a long run. I’ve lost count of the years, and yes, I’m tired. You?”

“Yes. We haven’t done anything new for years. No one has even asked for our help in ages! I’m tired too.”

“What about the family? We’ll have to warn them.”

She considered. “All our kids have passed on. Our oldest grandson, Leo, is eighty next year. But our descendants have scattered to the ends of the earth and across all the spaces. I’ll tell Leo, and he can spread the news. Will we go together, dear?”

“Yes, my dear. I’m almost certain of that. We do everything together.”

The Boffin went to her laboratory and was appalled. She realized that she hadn't been there for a long time, and everything was deep in dust. She started to tidy up and used the vacuum cleaner to clear the dust away. She kept coming across items that reminded her of significant events in their long lives, but she just sighed, and consigned them to the bin. Some items caused her to frown as she struggled to remember what they were for.

She ended up with three piles. One was junk, one was useful bits and pieces that could perhaps be sold, and the smallest pile was things that she wanted to pass on. She sighed again. So much, her notebooks for example, would mean nothing to someone else. The script that she used was long forgotten. Her scientific papers were now all available online, of course, but her books might be useful to someone.

She was carrying out some of the junk when the Mage came out of his study with a heap of junk of his own.

“It’s amazing what you find when you tidy up, isn’t it?” he said. “I found an old scroll that I borrowed a long time ago from a library in Alexandria, and forgot to take back. Well, the library was burned down a long time ago, so I took it to the museum there and left it on the front desk. I think that they’ll be surprised when they look at it!”

“Yeah, I found a telescope that Galileo gave me. One of the first ever. I think I’ll do the same as you and leave it at a museum.”

The paraphernalia that they had gathered over the years wasn't quickly sorted out, but they found time to relax in the dragon space. They would sit in their loungers or the swing seat and contemplate the rainbow sands and the pink halo around the sun. The lighter gravity was relaxing too.

They were there one day, when the Boffin said “I’m getting stiffer in my joints. I might have to get a stick to walk with soon. I think that we are ageing much faster than normal.”

“Yes, I’d noticed that. It means that the end will come sooner rather than later. Shall we visit The Queen, my dear? I’d like to say goodbye to her.”

“Yes, I would too. This current Queen is getting on a bit herself. She must be two or three thousand years old.”

They stepped to a peak overlooking the Queen's main nest and, changing into dragons, they called to her. She came, looking suspiciously at them until her senses told her who they were. She settled on the peak next to them, and to their surprise changed to human form.

"I didn't know that she could do that!" said the Boffin, as they quickly changed back to human form themselves. They dipped their heads to her, and she did the same to them, then she came forward and gave them a very human hug.

The Queen's human appearance was of a strong, active woman in, the Boffin estimated, her late fifties. Her clothes seemed to the Boffin to be modelled on her own clothes over the years. Her eyes were blue, not her usual dragon gold, with round pupils rather than slits, and they had tears in them. She had long plaited blond hair.

"We came to tell you that we won't be around much longer," said the Mage.

The Queen nodded and hugged them both again, then she walked to the edge of the peak and stepped out into the void, changing back to dragon form as she fell. She swooped up on an updraft and landed on the peak again, bugled and dipped her head. The other dragons all stopped what they were doing and formed a huge whirling cloud around the peak.

"I think that they are honouring us, my dear," said the Mage.

"Yes," breathed the Boffin. "It's amazing."

The Queen bugled again and the cloud of dragons dispersed. She dipped her head to the Boffin and the Mage and then took off, disappearing into the sky.

"Oh, my!" said the Boffin as they stepped back to their shack by the beach.

"Yes. Oh, my!"

While they were in dragon space they visited the sea dragons, but because the sea dragons did not have a queen, they just spent a pleasant few hours helping out in one of the nursery pools. Then they swam home to the shack listening to all the deep sea calls of distant sea dragons. They dined on some tasty crabs on the way back, guided by the calls of other sea dragons in the area.

“I hope that our replacements enjoy this space. We must show them, dear!” said the Boffin.

“That means we have to find them, doesn’t it? Tomorrow.”

The Mage and the Boffin discovered that their hearing was failing, and that words on the page were seemingly blurred. The Boffin made them both some spectacles, but the Mage was always forgetting where he had put his. So she hung them on a chain around his neck. The Mage conjured up a hearing spell, and that mostly solved the hearing issue.

“How do we find them? Our replacements? I’ve so much to tell them!”

“Hmm, let’s see.”

She threw their usual status display onto the wall with her favourite device. It was boringly green.

“Remember when it was rarely all green, dear?”

“Yes. How are you going to search, my dear?”

“Find our replacements,” she said to the device.

“Working,” it said.

The display on the screen started to swirl. It paused, swirled again, paused, and swirled again. It showed a chequerboard, horizontal stripes, then vertical stripes. Then it went back to swirls.

“What’s it doing, my dear?” asked the Mage.

“I don’t know! I’ve never seen it do this before. I hope it doesn’t overload the University server and network!”

He looked at her.

“You moved your stuff to the computer in our spare room years ago.”

“Oh yes, so I did.”

She tapped some keys on her device, and a small green box appeared.

“Hmm, the power is OK. Let’s leave it running.”

She shut down the screen.

“In the meantime, I’ll make some scones and cakes. We’ve people coming!”

Ever since they had told Leo the news, they had had a constant stream of people visiting, mostly relatives, but quite a few friends who knew of their unique background. Some people came stepping in from other spaces. Often there were other foci of Magic and Science that the Mage and the Boffin had helped to come into their own powers.

So they decided to declare open house, and the news got around. It turned into a sort of party. The instruction was “no long faces”. People brought their kids who roared around inside and outside of the house. Teenagers occupied the corners with their own devices, fingers flying, heads down. Someone started to cook on the barbecue, and several people worked on salads and desserts in the kitchen. The Mage and the Boffin circulated, chatting to everyone and enjoying the party, until suddenly the Boffin felt tired. She found the Mage, and he too was looking a little drawn.

Leo appeared at their elbows.

“Enough?” he asked, and they nodded.

Leo went to a few people and had a word in their ears. His chosen targets nodded in agreement, and loudly gathered up any kids, bags, and coats and departed. That started a general exodus, and finally only the Mage and the Boffin and Leo and his family were left.

“Thanks. Nicely done,” said the Mage tiredly.

“You’re welcome, Grandpa.” said Leo. “Erm, are you OK?”

“Yes, yes. We’re not quite ready to ‘pop off’ yet, Leo. We’re just tired. Thanks.”

“I’ll leave you, then. Call me if you need anything,” Leo said, and left with his family.

“Phew!” said the Boffin, collapsing on the sofa. Something squeaked.

“Oops! Someone has lost their toy.”

She gestured, using one of the Mage’s spells, and sent it home. The Mage was meanwhile loading the dishwasher.

“Ah, I can’t be bothered,” he said. “I’m going to cheat.”

He waved his hands and the dishes, cups and glasses, and cutlery whizzed around. Each object washed itself, dried itself, and put itself

away. The chaos of flying objects died down and the cupboard doors slammed shut.

“Ah, that was fun,” he said as he sat down on the sofa with the Boffin. “Shall we see if your search has finished?”

She nodded and clicked her device. The screen showed a small line which expanded, appearing to move towards them. It turned into letters, which continued to expand until the letters filled the screen. It paused for ten seconds or so, and then the letters expanded off the screen. The line reappeared and the sequence repeated.

“They live where?” said the Boffin in surprise.

“Are you sure?” asked the Mage, as they looked at the house. It was a moderately sized house, in a cul-de-sac, in the middle of a fairly large town, not far from the capital. The grounds were immaculate, short grass, showy flowers, trimmed hedges. The surrounding houses were similar. Suburbia.

“Yes, I’m sure. Shall we?”

She led him up the drive and pressed the bell, just as the door opened. A man in his mid thirties opened the door.

“Hi, we’ve been expecting you. My wife is out in the back garden. Please follow me.”

The Mage and the Boffin followed him through the house to the back garden. The Boffin loved the house. It was modern, clean and airy. The furnishings were tasteful, but not overpowering, and there were kids’ toys and other odds and ends scattered around which indicated that the inhabitants liked their house, liked good things, but weren’t over fussy. And that they had kids, of course.

“The twins are at a sleepover. The baby is asleep at the moment. Cup of tea?”

After they were all settled in with their tea, the Boffin said “You were expecting us?”

“Yes of course,” said the husband. “My wife can see into the future a little. I believe that you can too, sir?”

“Please call me ‘Adam’,” said the Mage. “It’s not my real name, but I’ve been called it so often that I quite like it. My wife is often known as ‘Eve’.”

“I’m Chris, and my wife is Charley. Charlotte, really. Adam and Eve? The first man and woman? You were the first?”

“No. We briefly met our predecessors, and they gave their names as Adam and Eve too. So, you are going to be our successors? Who is Magic, and who is Science, Chris?”

Charley looked at Chris.

“We don’t think of it like that,” she said. “We think of ourselves as Technology and Nature. Well, at the moment we do. Shall we tell them our story, dear?”

“Yes, my dear, I think that would be a good idea.”

“I’ll just feed the baby. Then I’ll tell the story. It was interesting, that’s for sure.”

Chris arrived the designated business suite in the hotel. He helped himself to a cup of bad coffee and a tired Danish pastry and looked around. He still wasn’t sure why he had been invited, as he wasn’t the most senior in the firm where he worked. There were fifteen to twenty people present, and to Chris’ eye, they seemed a very mixed bunch. There was a sprinkling of suits, like himself, a few jeans and sneakers types, and even one person in a boiler suit, looking a bit lost. In other words, “technical” types.

Then there were others, who he thought of as “non-technical”. Chris tended to categorize people, but he wasn’t sure if it was a good thing or not. Sometimes his guesses were accurate, and other times he was wide of the mark. One person was in kaftan and sandals, several others were in sweaters and casual trousers, one had purple hair and a Mohawk.

One girl stood out. She had obviously decided to dress up for the occasion, with long brown hair tied back, black knee-length skirt and white blouse. At first, he wasn’t sure which category she belonged to, then he saw a big “Save the Wetlands” badge on her smart black jacket. The badge referred to a current environmental protest, he knew, so he tentatively guessed she was a “non-technical”.

Chris walked over to her.

“Hi, I’m Chris,” he said. “I see that you support the Wetlands protest.”

“Hi, I’m Charley. My real name is Charlotte. Yes, I think that the road could be built without harming the Wetlands. Which side are you on?”

“Well, I don’t know all the details, but it does look as if the road could be built away from the Wetlands. So I’m leaning to your side. Have you any idea why we are here?”

“For a job, isn’t it? Though the invite was a bit vague, wasn’t it? ‘An unbelievable opportunity to influence the direction that this country and the whole world are heading’.”

“Yes, if I wasn’t unsettled in my job I would have thrown the invitation in the bin. I’ve never been invited to apply for a job before, so I was inclined to just dismiss it. But I’ve been thinking lately that my job meant ignoring all the factors that make life worth living, and steamrolling people and the environment. I liked the job description. It seemed to be just the thing that I was looking for, though it is a bit vague.”

“Well, I’m just a secretary, but I’ve always wanted to do something worthwhile, to make a difference. The Wetlands protest is only part of it, and I feel that I could do more.”

“Oh, the doors have opened. Let’s go in.”

Chris was a bit disappointed that he found his name card on a seat well away from where Charley was sitting. Then he noticed that all the people he had thought of as technical were seated to the right and all the ones he had thought as non-technical were on the left.

There was a single table at the front of the room, and sitting there was an older man. Chris thought that he was fifty at least, though something made him think he was much older.

“Greetings,” said the man at the front. “My name is Simon, and we are all here because I have been given the task of filling the roles which two of my friends will be relinquishing shortly. I can tell you that it is highly likely that one of the successful candidates will come from the left side of the room and the other will come from the right side. Some of you will have noticed that the people here fall into one of two groups.”

He didn’t elaborate on that comment.

Simon continued “First we will give you a simple questionnaire to fill in, which you can think of as a personality test if you like. You can take as long as you like on it. The test will eliminate most of you, unfortunately. For those that pass the first stage, there will be a second stage, which I will describe later. Any questions?”

“What’s the salary? Can you provide a more detailed job description?” asked a suit from the front row.

“I’m not allowed to talk about any remuneration. It will be generous, I guarantee that. Similarly, I cannot provide a job description, partly because the successful candidates will mostly write it themselves.”

“Stuff and nonsense! I’ve never applied for a job under these sorts of restrictions. It’ll be a scam of some sort.”

“It’s not a scam, and you did not apply for it. You were invited because you might have the qualities that are needed. You are free to leave if you wish.”

Simon managed to convey the impression that he thought that inviting the man in the suit was a mistake. The man in the suit muttered but stayed seated. Simon passed around the questionnaires and when Chris got his, he examined it without starting it right away. It was a confusion of yes/no tick boxes, multiple choice questions and boxes for longer answers. In other words it was like any other test of its sort. He looked carefully but there were no clues to who was running the test, and the firm that had printed the questionnaires was a well-known firm of printers in the city.

The questions were mainly related to technology and the environment and how they interacted. Several hypothetical examples were used across several questions. They made him think of Charley, so he looked across to where she was sitting. It looked like she too was examining the papers before starting. She finished her examination and looked over at him and smiled. She gave the cross-fingers sign, then turned back and started ticking boxes.

Chris went through the questionnaire trying not to overthink the questions because he knew that they worked best if you didn’t try to work out what the purpose of the quiz was, but it soon became apparent that the questions were designed to find out how much he sympathized with the non-technical view of the world.

Then he had a sudden thought, and reviewed the questions. Yes, for a person who was concerned more with the environment than technology, the question would find out how sympathetic to technology the person was. It was cleverly done. He thoughtfully completed his form as honestly as possible.

Simon said “Please leave me your completed questionnaire as you go. When you come back at, say one o’clock, I will be able to tell you if you will be needed for the second phase.”

Charley and Chris went to lunch together. He found out that she wasn’t just a secretary. She was taking a year off from University, and was working as a secretary to pay the rent and to let her pursue her interests in nature and the outdoors. They had both hiked some of the big trails and compared notes.

She found out that he worked on digital alarms and tracking technology. Some of his work had been used to track wildlife, and she was fascinated by it. They got on well, laughing and joking together.

She suddenly became serious.

“Do you think that you got through the first test? I couldn’t work out what it was testing for. Except, maybe it was testing the technical people to see if they were sympathetic to the environment and vice versa.”

“That’s exactly what I thought!” he said. “But is being sympathetic to the other point of view going to be a good thing or a bad thing from Simon’s point of view?”

“Oh, I think it going to a good thing. Definitely. Most people are firmly on the one side or the other these days, so there wouldn’t much point in testing.”

He stared at her. “You’re absolutely right. It’s obvious. Well, I think that I would have scored well in the test, then. How about you?”

“I think that I would have come out well, too. I like technology. For instance, I like your trackers, and if we use them well, we could find out a lot about the environment and any damage that we might be doing to it a lot earlier.”

“OK, maybe we should be getting back.”

They strolled back to the hotel and discovered a disturbance going on. The guy with the suit who had asked about salary earlier was arguing

with Simon at the door to the room.

“Why won’t you let me in? I’m probably the most qualified person here! And you let that guy with Mohawk. back in!”

“I’m sorry, sir, but according to the test, you are not suitable for the job.”

“Now look here...” started the man again.

Simon looked him in the eyes and the man deflated. He muttered to himself, but turned and walked away.

“He’ll forget about all this in an hour or two,” said Simon. “Come on in you two. You’ve both passed the test.”

“That was the first time that you two had met?” asked the Boffin.

She was holding the baby, and the Mage was not surprised. If there was a baby around, the Boffin was usually holding it.

“Yes,” said Charley. “We discussed it afterwards, and we wondered how we, and all the others, had been selected. We hadn’t talked to anyone about feeling dissatisfied with our lives. Well, maybe I told my Mum, but she didn’t know Simon. Anyway, after we found out that Simon was special, it didn’t seem a problem any more.”

“We knew a Simon, from way back at the beginning,” said the Mage. “He received a lot of power by accident it seemed, and passed most of it on to us. I think it may be the same person. We thought that he had died, but I guess that he kept some of the power, probably without realizing it.”

“From when you started? I thought that he seemed very old,” said Chris. “Maybe he is a ‘chooser’. Someone who exists to select the next couple for the jobs that we do.”

Charley was looking concerned.

“What’s the matter, dear?” asked the Boffin. “Are you worried about us? That we are reaching the end? Well don’t be! We have had a long time in our roles, and it is time. Finally, we are tired. We are happy about it! It’s up to you to shape the world from now on.”

“Yes,” said the Mage. “We are handing over to you. It’s time. But anyway, please go on with your story.”

There were seven people in the room with Simon, they saw, including himself and Charley. Chris reckoned that four of them were from his side of the room, and while three were from her side. The guy with the boiler suit was still there, but he looked a lot more relaxed now. He was chatting with the lady in the caftan.

“Right!” said Simon. “You all passed the test. What do you think?”

The guy with the Mohawk. said “I think that you were testing to find out which of us could get along best with those of us who were on the other side of the room, the technologists. Like me. I spend my time mostly on stirring up awareness of the critters and plants that are being displaced by the expansion of our cities and towns. But I love gaming. I love technology. I just believe that we need to control what it is doing to our world.”

Everyone nodded.

“You are correct,” Simon said. “The second stage is going to interest you. You are going to interview each other!”

The remaining seven looked at each other.

“You’ve already worked out that those on the left-hand side of the room are enthusiastic about the environment, while those on the right are devotees of technology.”

He paused and there were nods from all of them.

“So, you have to interview those on the other side of the room, and choose who you think should be the one who gets the job. If, for example, you were given one role, you have to choose the person for the other role. It will be decided by secret vote.”

“So, the roles are linked?” asked the guy in the boiler suit.

Most of the others nodded, wondering about it too.

“Yes, very much so,” said Simon. “Now, firstly, can those of you on the left-hand side of the room go into the interview room.”

He indicated a door behind him. Chris frowned. He didn’t remember a door being there.

And so the afternoon progressed. The three from the left-hand side of the room went in and one by one the other four were interviewed. It was

more of a chat really, and surprisingly enjoyable. When it came to his turn, Chris found it easy to talk to the three from the other side of the room.

Then they all swapped over. Chris and the others took over in the interview room, and the other three were interviewed one by one. It was fun. The three “from the other side” were quick, intelligent and amusing. The guy with the Mohawk, Greg, Chris found to be fascinating. He was a gaming expert, when he wasn’t lobbying for endangered species.

They all gathered in the main room, laughing and chatting.

“I thought that you would find that fun,” said Simon. “Right! Now for the business end. I’ll pass out these papers and I want you to choose the person that you think should be given the job. It will be hard. I must ask that you don’t discuss your selection with the others.”

He passed around the voting papers. Chris was torn. Of course, he wanted to pick Charley, but he wondered if he was biased by his attraction to her. In the end he sighed and ticked her name. He made mental apologies to Greg, but he sincerely thought that Charley would be the best of the three.

Charley was also torn. Chris seemed the obvious choice of course, but the guy in the boiler suit was interesting and had a dry sense of humour. But in the end she ticked Chris’ name.

They all turned in their papers to Simon. It was all much serious now, and the chatting died down.

Simon smiled at them.

“You’ve all expressed interest in a role which you know almost nothing about, but which promises only vague rewards. Any of you would have been a good fit for the roles, but only two of you have succeeded in securing them.”

He paused.

“The votes are unanimous. The two who will fill those roles are Chris and Charley!”

Charley gasped and Chris moved to her and hugged her. All the others congratulated the pair, and then, one by one, took their leave and left.

“What happened when you were selected,” asked Chris.

“Well, it was fairly similar,” said the Mage. “We were in the middle of a battle between Magic and Science. Simon was struck by a blast from both sides and as a result absorbed a huge amount of power. He stopped the war, and called together representatives from both sides. Then we were selected by our peers.”

“He excluded those who did not have any sympathy for the other side first, dear,” said the Boffin.

“Oh, yes. And then he sent us off for a week’s holiday.”

“He sent us off for a week too!” said Charley. “Oh, that was fun.”

“And romantic,” said Chris.

“Yeah. That too,” said Charley. “The first bit was scary, though!”

“Well done,” said Simon. “I guessed that you would be the ones when you first arrived. There was an immediate bond between you. You have a lot to learn, but first...”

He walked forward and held hands with them and Charley and Chris both felt **something** transferring from him to them.

“Oh,” said Charley. “What was that?”

Simon smiled.

“I’m going to send you on holiday for a week, to get to know each other. I’ll meet you when you get back, we can talk, and then it will be up to you.”

Suddenly they were standing on the deck of a villa overlooking a deep blue lagoon. The sands were pale, almost white, and the vegetation at the top of the beach was the deepest green. Vines straggled up the white walls of the villa, bursting with flowers and laden with fruit. Hummingbirds darted from blossom to blossom, probing for the luscious nectar in the depths of flowers.

“What the...” said Chris.

Charley sat down with a thump on a convenient lounge.

“How...” she said.

She burst into tears, and Chris sat down and put his arm round her. She was shaking. Chris was too concerned about her to be upset himself. Suddenly Simon appeared in front of them.

“Oh, dear, I’m sorry. I underestimated the effect on you of stepping you here unexpectedly. Please accept my apologies. By the way, I’m not snooping on you. Your distress alerted me. I can, if you wish help you calm down.”

“No, no, thanks Simon. I’ll be OK in a minute. But how, how.... I need a Martini!”

There was a ping and a Martini appeared on the table. Charley looked it.

“Oh my god!”

“Sorry again,” said Simon. “That’s a function of the villa. It’s completely automatic.”

“In which case, I’ll have one too,” said Chris.

There was a ping and a Martini appeared near to him.

Chris took the Martini and sipped it.

“Cheers,” he said, shakily.

“So you didn’t know anything about the powers?” asked the Mage.

“Not a clue,” said Chris, “and we didn’t know that we had the powers. We thought it was all Simon at first, but we soon learned!”

“Did you go to a villa?” asked Charley. “Ours was amazing, though we only had a couple of days there.”

“No, dear,” said the Boffin. “We spent our week in a shack on the beach. We liked it so much we created a shack on a beach in what we called ‘dragon space’.”

“‘Dragon space’?”

“Yes, you know now that there are, as the youngsters these days say, multiple worlds? We call them ‘spaces’ not ‘worlds’. ‘Dragon space’ belongs to the dragons, but they let us have a shack there. They’re very friendly, but don’t like too many people around.”

“Well call them ‘spaces’ too!” said Chris. “What a coincidence.”

He thought for a minute. “But maybe not. That’s what Simon called them.”

“Here,” said the Boffin, holding Charley’s hand. “This is where ‘dragon space’ is. And this is where the peak is where we meet the Queen. She’s getting old now, and might not be around for long, just like us. The shack is yours now, of course, if you want it.”

“Oh, thank you. We will check it out, definitely. It sounds like a great place for children.”

“It is. We often used to take our kids there. Don’t forget to check out the sea dragons. They’re lovely creatures.”

“So, what did you do for the rest of your week?” asked the Mage.

“Well....” said Chris.

Simon made sure that they had relaxed a little, and then left them to it. They started to explore the villa and found that it was exactly like a five star villa “back home”. There were two bedrooms with bathrooms en suite, and a shared living area. There was no TV, but there was a well stocked fridge and a room service menu next to the phone.

“I’m going to get out of this suit,” said Chris, and retreated to his bedroom.

He came back out, and Charley had changed too. She was wearing what Chris thought of as a sundress. She had bare feet, she had untied her hair, and looked amazing. She looked at his attire, which consisted of a brightly coloured shirt and khaki shorts, finished off with a pair of flip-flops, and laughed.

“You didn’t have to dress up for the occasion,” she said. “I’m getting hungry. Shall we order something from room service?”

So they did. No sooner had they put the phone down than the doorbell rang. Chris opened the door and there was a cart, bearing their meal, and an opened bottle of champagne.

“That’s what I call service,” joked Chris. “We didn’t order the champagne, did we? It must be on the house!”

They ate their meal on the terrace and marvelled at the array of stars which appeared when the sun went down. Two small moons rose soon

after, but after the wonders that they had seen that day, this was not a shock, but an amazing and enjoyable sight. They relaxed and drank the wine and talked late into the night. Then Charley gave him a hug and disappeared into her room. Chris looked at her closed door and pondered. Then he retired to his own room.

The next morning Charley was woken by a seagull. It perched on rail of the deck outside her room and went “Quark! Quark!”

“Thank you, alarm clock,” she said and got up.

She showered and dressed, choosing a simple top, shorts and slip on shoes, and went into the living area where she found that Chris was already up. He’d ditched the floral shirt for an ordinary white t-shirt, but had kept the shorts, and was wearing casual slip on shoes too.

“Look what I found outside the door,” he said.

It was a cart with all sorts of breakfast items on it.

“Mmm, I’m usually a muesli and fruit type of girl, but today, well, the eggs look great and the bacon smells amazing.”

She opened a small box.

“Toast. What’s the betting it stays just right until we take it out?”

“Did you get woken by a seagull?” he asked.

“Yes! Oh that’s so funny. I called it an alarm clock. I think maybe I was right!”

They ate their breakfast, and then they had to decide what to do. They chose to walk along the beach to the headland that they could see from the villa. It wasn’t far. Chris located a small back pack in his room and when he went to the fridge for water he found two neatly packed lunches.

“Charley,” he called, “We have packed lunches.”

She looked in the fridge and said “Those weren’t there yesterday. Why am I not that surprised?”

They set off along the beach. The weather was warm but not too hot and a pleasant breeze came off the ocean. They strolled along, sometimes on the sand and sometimes at the edge of the surf. They turned the point and a wide bay became visible.

“What’s that? A signpost?” said Charley.

It was about a hundred metres from the point and when they reached it they found that it had an arrow on it, pointing inland. The sign read “This way.” They followed the indicated trail and eventually reached a clearing.

“I don’t believe it!” laughed Charley. “In the middle of the jungle, there’s a race track? Come on!”

She put on a helmet from the rack and jumped into one of the karts and was soon whizzing round the track. Chris leapt into the other kart and followed her. Charley was a good driver, Chris realized, but so was he. Charley was going a fraction faster than him, but Chris thought that probably she had an advantage because she weighed less than him.

Then he found that the centre of the steering wheel was a button which gave him a short boost in speed, and he was soon catching Charley and passing her. The second time he slowed alongside her.

“There’s a button on the steering wheel,” he shouted, and soon she was passing him again.

After a while the little karts parked themselves and refused to move. They climbed out and returned their helmets to the rack.

“That was fun,” she said. “I was going faster than you.”

“I think you are a good driver. But the difference might just have been because you are lighter than I am.”

She considered. “Yes, you are probably right. You’re good too. Thanks for letting me pass, by the way. My brothers taught me to drive, and they would never have let me pass them!”

“Well, if we do this again, let’s see if the carts can be adjusted so that our top speeds are the same. Then we can have a real battle.”

“Which I will, of course, win,” she said teasingly.

“Not a chance,” he said.

“What next?” Charley wondered. “Oh, there’s another sign!”

“Directing us back to the beach.”

The walked back to the beach and the sign now pointed them further along the beach.

“That’s a little spooky,” said Chris, as they started off in that direction.

“Oh, nothing here can hurt us. I’m sure of it,” she said.

“We had a shack for our week. We swam, we walked. Generally relaxed. Got to know one another,” said the Boffin.

“There was that temple with the maze, my dear,” said the Mage. “We had fun in that place.”

“Yes, though I was a little worried when the slab dropped with me on one side and you on the other, dear. It was a long ten seconds until I found the switch!”

They described the temple and its maze to Charley and Chris.

“It sounds like a computer game,” said Chris.

“Yes, it was much like that, without the monsters and people shooting at you,” said the Mage. “But I loved swimming in the lagoon, though.”

“You should have seen your eyes when I came out in my bikini the first time,” laughed the Boffin.

“In all our years together you never thought to mention that before, my dear!” said the Mage, and they all laughed.

“We didn’t swim in the lagoon! I wish we had now,” said Charley.

“So that you could cause my eyes to bug out, my dear?” asked Chris, laughing.

“What else did you do in your week?” asked Charley.

“Oh, well,” said the Boffin, “apart from swimming in the lagoon, we mainly walked on the beach. There were some interesting seal or walrus type animals with crests on their heads. They smelled horrible! We also climbed the hill behind the shack. It was lovely up there.”

“Oh, we climbed the hill, too, after the karts,” said Charley.

“Do go on with your story, dear,” said the Boffin.

They strolled along the shore, occasionally investigating the rock pools, as everyone does. Little purple crabs scuttled about as they moved small stones, and tiny fish sprinted from place to place among the seaweed. Blood red anemones waved their tentacles, searching for food. Snails

were everywhere, ranging in size from pin head to a few centimetres across. Limpets and mussels clung to the rocks, clamped tight when they were above the water line.

They stopped for lunch under a coconut tree. At least, that's what Chris thought of it as. The fruit seemed slightly different from the usual coconut fruit, almost like a double nut. Chris was uncertain if there were similar plants "back home".

"This is nice," said Charley. "Relaxing."

"Mmm, yes. I wonder if we are on a tropical island? I wonder if we are in a different place to 'back home', or nearer the equator?"

"So many questions," she teased. "Actually I think that Simon made this place and it will not exist after we go back."

"You do? It's specially made for us, you think?"

He would later learn to trust her feelings. She was usually right.

They got up and continued along the beach until they saw another sign post pointing inland. The track through the jungle rapidly started to climb, and they had to scramble in places. Once they used a convenient vine to clamber up a steep bit.

Chris looked at the vine. Very convenient, he thought suspiciously. Then he gave in and just enjoyed himself. They came out on top of the hill and found a small concrete lookout platform, complete with a metal plate with directions and names on it. At first Chris thought that he couldn't read the names, but then he could.

"Oh, look, Chris. 'Atlantis'."

That arrow pointed out to sea.

"Yeah. 'Londinium'." he said, pointing to another arrow. "And 'River Amazon' out that way. I wonder if they are just named for those places or whether they somehow are those places?"

"Does it matter?"

He sighed.

"Not really. I just can't suppress the logician in me, even in this wonderful place."

She put her hand on his shoulder.

“It’s a coping mechanism. Don’t worry. Just make sure you enjoy it.”

“I will. And how do you cope?”

“By just accepting it. We are different people, and we cope differently with, well, this strange situation. I think you would call it ‘unreal’? I feel that it is real, but different.”

He put his arm round her waist.

“You’re very smart you know.”

They stayed like that for a moment or two then separated.

“The arrow points this way. Let’s go. The sun is getting low in the sky,” she said.

They walked down the track, which was easier than the track up, and as the sun set brilliant little lights appeared in the bushes alongside the track.

“Glow-worms!”

Chris stopped and enticed one of the little creatures onto his hand. Its light strobed from red to violet and then back again.

“Beautiful,” said Charley, and the insect flew off.

“Thank you!” she called after it.

When they arrived back on the beach, they could see the lights of the villa up ahead.

“If this is what the job entails, then I’ll stay here for ever!”

“Could you?” asked Chris, seriously.

She paused. “No, not really. As nice as this is, it would probably get boring after a while. And there’s no people!”

“I think there’s more to the job than relaxing in a villa!”

They found that there was already food waiting for them, with a chilled bottle of wine. They ate their meal as the two moons slowly travelled across the sky.

“This is so lovely. Good food, good wine, and a wonderful companion,” said Chris, and impulsively grabbed her hand.

She put her other hand over his.

“Yes, it is isn’t it.”

After a while she took her hands back again, and sat there thoughtfully. Chris thought that she was more reserved for the rest of the evening. Had he made a grave mistake? What had happened? When they went to bed that night, she still hugged him, as she had the day before. Once again he was left looking at her door and pondering.

The next day she was as cheerful as ever, but there was maybe still some reserve. They walked in the opposite direction along the beach and found a little aquarium. They marvelled at all the little creatures living in the tanks.

“I’d prefer it if they were back home in the sea,” said Charley, “but I suppose they are well looked after, and they don’t know any different. And no predators, I suppose.”

Chris put a sympathetic hand on her shoulder but immediately regretted it, given her mood, but she didn’t seem to mind, and in fact she gave him a smile.

They stopped for lunch on the beach under one of the maybe coconut trees, then they followed the mysterious arrows, which directed them up to the hill, and to a grotto in the side of it. The path took them through a cave full of stalagmites and stalactites, limestone flows and reflecting pools. A mysterious light followed them through the cave until they emerged into the daylight again.

She grabbed his hand and said “Don’t mind me.”

Then she started off up the trail. Chris looked after her, bemused, then set off after her. He had no idea what she meant. They ended up at the top of the hill at what looked like the same lookout point. However, the names on the arrows were different.

“Look, ‘Atlantis’ is now ‘America’,” Charley said. “And ‘Londinium’ is now ‘Paris’. How strange!”

Chris looked in the direction of the arrow which now said “River Thames”.

“River Nile,” he said, and the arrow changed.

“How did you.... Oh!”

She looked in another direction and said “Tokyo” and the arrow changed.

“I wonder if they really mean anything,” said Chris.

“Who cares! Maybe we will be able to go there some time.”

They headed off down the hill, and again the glow-worms lit up as the light failed, showing them the way back to the villa. Their meal and wine was waiting for them again, and Charley seemed to be back to normal. Chris was keeping at an arm’s length, giving her room, but that seemed to disappoint her a little. When they went to bed she hugged and kissed him before disappearing behind her door.

“You’re a lovely, lovely man,” she said before she dashed off.

He wondered if he would be left looking at her door and pondering all week.

The next day, though, Simon paid them a visit.

“Simon visited you during your week?” asked the Boffin.

“Yes,” said Chris. “We woke up on the third day, and he was waiting for us in the living area. He said ‘I’m sorry to bother you, but I need to show you something’.”

“Then he talked to us about ‘spaces’, and showed us how to step. Then he took us on a tour,” said Charley.

“We visited city after city,” said Chris, “as well as some spaces without cities. Simon was showing us all the solutions that humans have tried to balance technology and nature and the problems with them. Actually, I’m not even sure that some of them were real, though I’m not sure what I mean by ‘real’.”

“Yeah.” said Charley. “The City of Atlantis, on the island of the same name. Alexandria. Xanadu. New York, Marsopolis. The Forest of Llun. The Last City. Gotham City.”

“Gotham City? Did you meet Bruce Wayne?” asked the Mage.

“Yes, briefly,” said Chris. “A very quiet man, dedicated to improving his city.”

He paused.

“When Simon took us back to the villa in the evening, he stayed for a meal. He talked about you a lot. Well about your early years, anyway. Was he really a King?”

“Yes,” said the Boffin. “He was our best friend in those days, when we were finding our feet. He was also finding his feet as ruler. He was simply a young man who got hit by immense forces, and who was made powerful by them.”

The Mage said “You know, I can’t remember how his reign ended. It seems that one minute he was king and the next someone else was. Isn’t that odd?”

The Boffin nodded. “That’s true. I’d not realized it before now. Anyway, please go on with your story.”

That night, their third in the villa, Simon stayed with them for a meal. He showed them a few tricks with energy balls, and mentioned that they would discover other powers over time.

“You’ve got a long learning time ahead. Your predecessors were born into a world where many of these powers were well-known, but today they are mostly hidden or forgotten. But I have to go now. I’ll see you again at the end of your week. Enjoy the rest of it, and don’t be surprised to find that things are different in the morning.”

He stepped away and disappeared.

“I wonder what he meant by that?” said Chris.

“I guess we will find out,” laughed Charley.

She realized that she was holding his hand and pulled him close and kissed him.

“Goodnight,” she said and headed to her room.

She paused just before she shut the door and smiled at him. Chris was left looking at her door again.

The next morning Chris awoke to the sound of the “alarm seagull”. He discovered that he wasn’t in his bed in the villa. No, he was in a sleeping bag. In a tent. He unzipped the front of the tent and saw a vista of mountains, snow capped and rugged.

Charley was already up and struggling with what looked like a camping stove.

“Morning! I was going to make some tea, but I don’t know to make it work.”

“Use your mind,” suggested Chris, without realizing that it might sound insulting.

Charley just said “Oh, yes. Like Simon showed us.”

She had it lit in seconds.

Chris ducked back into his tent and got dressed. He found that his villa clothes were now hiking gear. No surprise, really. He extracted a cup from the backpack in his tent and also grabbed a packet of breakfast oatmeal and joined Charley.

“‘Use your mind’, he says,” said Charley.

“Ah, sorry. I thought I’d got away with that little mistake.”

She laughed and gave him his tea. He put a pan on to heat water for his porridge, and asked her what she was going to eat.

“Energy bar,” she said, showing him. “But porridge would have been my second choice.”

They sat and looked at the view which was spectacular. They were already quite high up, but still below the tree line. The campsite was on a rocky outcrop overlooking a deep wooded valley, with a stream visible here and there down below them. Birds could be heard calling the woods below.

Incongruously, there was a toilet block behind the tents.

“Thanks Simon,” she said as she went off to brush her teeth.

They packed up the tents into their backpacks. The tents had a tab on them and when Chris pressed the tab on his, it shrank down to a small silver box. He’d forgotten to take his backpack out of the tent, so he had to expand it again so that he could get it. Charley was laughing at him, so he stuck his tongue out at her, which just made her laugh even more.

“What now?” she wondered.

“Let’s look at that sign post,” suggested Chris, laughing. “Maybe will give us a hint.”

It turned out that the sign said “Simon’s Trail. Start here,” and there was also a small map.

“Oh, so it’s a big loop. We’re at Campsite One. There’s Hut One. Then Campsite Two, Hut Two and then back here again,” said Chris. “Let’s go!”

Simon’s Trail started by dropping down into the valley, zigzagging on the steepest bits, but finally it reached the river. It then turned and headed up the valley. After a few kilometres, they came across a sign that said “Worth-a-Look Waterfall”. The sign pointed to a side track.

“What do you think?” asked Chris, laughing.

Charley pretended to ponder. “It’s probably worth a look.”

They strolled up the sidetrack, and could hear the falls before they got to them. The water cascaded down several steps, each about twenty metres high, ending in a deep rocky pool. It was beautiful. Ferns and mosses covered the rocks where the waters dampened them. The water, where it wasn’t full of air from the fall, was dark and clear.

Charley crouched down and felt the water in the pool.

“Freezing!” she said. “I thought so!”

They walked back to the main track.

“Definitely worth a look,” said Chris, and they both laughed.

The track zigzagged upwards and eventually came back to the stream again. A swing bridge took them to the other side, and they could just see the mist of the fall downstream. They decided to stop for lunch at the far side of the bridge where there was a small meadow. They found a package of sandwiches and a small fruit bar in their back packs.

“Look at this!” said Chris.

The wrapping on his sandwiches had written on it “Don’t forget to make your own at Hut One!” Charley’s package had the same on it, and they both collapsed in giggles.

In the afternoon they pressed on, climbing ever higher. Gaps started to appear in the trees. Whole slopes were covered in tussock grass or small shrubs rather than trees, and Chris thought that they were probably a lot higher than Campsite One. The track crossed an occasional scree slope and still they climbed. They finally spotted the hut in the distance, and trudged wearily across the final few hundred metres to the shelter.

“Look at the sunset,” said Chris, and put his arm tentatively round Charley’s shoulders. She put her arm around his waist.

The sun set in a shroud of orange, yellow and red, and the stars started to come out. It was getting cold, and Charley shivered, so they moved into the hut. The hanging lanterns seemed to be conventional battery lamps, but the light was brighter than usual, and the wood burner stove didn’t need feeding with wood, but the rest of the cabin was rough and ready like a real cabin. The bunks were chunky, with slats and thin white plastic mattresses.

“Curry?” asked Chris.

Charley nodded, so they delved in their packs, and found a packet of rice and a packet of curry each. Chris put two pans of water on top of the stove.

They were sitting on the rough sofa. Chris put his arm around her, but she moved away.

“Chris,” she said. “I think I’m falling in love with you.”

“Me too. Is that a problem?”

She paused to empty the packets of rice and curry into the boiling water. She returned and sat on the sofa, not close, not distant.

“Don’t you think that it’s a bit, well, a bit **convenient**?”

He waited for her to continue.

“We’re picked for these jobs, we’re sent away for a week, we fall in love. Do we have no say in this?”

She started to cry, and let him put his arm around her.

“Charley, my dear, do you not want to fall in love with me?”

She shook her head. She realized that the gesture was ambiguous.

“Of course I do. I want to fall in love with you. I c-c-c-can’t help myself!”

He thought a bit.

“Suppose you are walking to work and your bag strap breaks. This really handsome guy called Chris stops and helps, and you end up arranging to meet for coffee later. And then... Would that be any different?”

She had a think.

“But this thing is going to completely change our lives!”

“Wouldn’t the other scenario also completely change our lives?”

“I suppose. Sort of.”

“The thing about falling in love, so they tell me, is that you don’t have a choice. Boy meets girl. They fall in love, or they go on with their lives separately. They don’t choose. It just happens. Or so they tell me. And so far as I am aware, nothing can **make** you fall in love.”

“I guess. Just hold me.”

He did.

“I think that you are worried that we are being manipulated, aren’t you? Manipulated into loving each other. It is more correct to say that we have been put into a situation where we have been able to fall in love, I think. I don’t know what life will be like in the future, but I’m glad that we are going to find out together. I don’t think that we would have been given the job if we weren’t going to fall in love.”

“We knew about each other before we came into our roles,” said the Boffin, “but we had never met. We were supposed to be enemies, of course. Almost from the moment our peers selected us, I felt the attraction between us.”

“I agree,” said the Mage. “Simon sent us away for a week to get to know each other, and it didn’t take long. We kissed quite early on, and I think we knew, but when she disappeared behind the slab of rock and I couldn’t open it again, well, I was certain.”

“What happened next?” asked the Boffin.

She loved a good story. She shifted the baby to the other arm and waited.

“Well, we walked through some gorgeous scenery. The next day we dropped down the other side of the ridge to the river on the other side. We saw some animals. It was wonderful.”

They started off the next day and the track took them down into the basin beyond the ridge. On this side the vegetation seemed more tropical.

Chris noticed animal tracks in the softer mud and pointed them out to Charley.

“Some sort of pig?” guessed Charley.

She was right. The track skirted an open glade, and on the far side a family of small pig-like creatures were rooting around by a fallen tree. When Charley and Chris appeared they squealed and ran away.

At another spot they could see clear across the stream and a bear like animal stood on its hind legs to watch them go. They passed a small lake with waterfowl cruising its placid surface. There were ducks and geese paddling in the shallows, while herons stalked the edges and turned over stones on the beaches.

“Look, Chris! Kingfishers!”

Two of the bright blue birds perched on a dead tree on the margins of the lake, occasionally diving into the lake after a fish or other morsel.

Further out, round a point, a flock of swans regally cruised the lake, totally black except for white bars on their wings. Among them were a number of small fluffy grey chicks who spent part of the time on the back of a parent, between the parent’s raised wings.

Chris and Charley lunched at a point where two streams joined. Butterflies fluttered over the small meadow and tiny birds sang their hearts out as they flew from small bush to small bush.

“You know something? There are no midges or sandflies,” said Charley.

“Yes, you are right. They would have made a spot like this very uncomfortable.”

He bit into his sandwich with enthusiasm. They’d remembered Simon’s note and made up a packed lunch as directed. A swallow of pure clean water tasted like nectar.

“I really like this place,” he said.

“We’ll have to find one like it, for ourselves,” said Charley.

“It’s getting more real, now, isn’t it. Our situation. But I’m up for the challenge, and I think that you are too.”

He helped her up, and kissed her, then they set off. The track took off up the other stream, and it climbed steadily. At one point they spotted

some monkey-like creatures clambering around in a tree, and later, a deer walked onto the track, only to disappear again almost instantly.

The sun was just about to sink behind the hill when they came across a grassy terrace, in a bend in the river. There was a big sign that said “Campsite Two” and an out-of-place toilet block here, just like at Campsite One.

Charley put her arm around him.

“Do we really need two tents?” she asked.

“Well, yes,” he said seriously. “We need somewhere to put the back packs and other stuff.”

She laughed.

They cooked up another meal from a couple of the packets of dried food, and decided, no, dehydrated food should **not** taste as good as this. Charley found a packet of dates in her back pack.

“Oh yum! Do you like dates, Chris?”

“Yeah. But keep yours. I’ve probably got a packet too.”

And he had. They munched away on the sweet fruit.

“You know, when we get back home, I’m going to buy a bottle of champagne, to celebrate, but I can wait.”

“To celebrate?”

“Yes. Charley, will you marry me?”

“Yes! Of course. Oops, where did my packet of dates go? I think I let go of them when I hugged you.”

“Here they are. So, no reservations now, Charley?”

“None at all! Why was I worried? It seems so silly now.”

“It wasn’t silly. I thought exactly the same, but I’d worked it all out. Rationalized it, I guess. I think that you needed to **feel** it.”

“Why didn’t you say?”

“I didn’t want to put pressure on you. I wanted you to make up your own mind.”

“I want to kiss you.”

So that is exactly what she did.

The next day they got up and breakfasted, then packed up and headed off up the trail. It climbed steadily and quite steeply, Charley suspected that they were the highest that they had been on the track, and the track got trickier as it rose. Eventually they found themselves on the top of a mountain. It wasn't the highest in the neighbourhood by far, but it was well above the vegetation line. Charley could see the basin on one side that held Campsite One, and on the other, the basin that held Campsite Two.

"Isn't this glorious?" said she said. "Look an eagle or something? Oh, there's more."

"Do you think that they are small dragons? No? Oh well, never mind."

Several great birds were riding the thermals and the updrafts around the peaks, occasionally dropping down into the valleys after prey. The birds were quite distant and didn't seem interested in Chris and Charley.

They dropped down off the peak and found a sheltered area to eat their lunch, which was an energy bar and raisins. They hadn't bothered to make a packed lunch while they were at Campsite Two.

"Come on then, let's go," said Chris. "Tonight is our last night here. I'm going to miss it."

"Yeah, me too," said Charley with her arm around his waist.

They started along the ridge which became steadily narrower until they reached a part where the ridge became a knife-edge. They stopped.

"Well, I don't believe we can come to any harm here," said Charley and started off along the knife-edge.

Chris had a vision of her tumbling off the edge and down into the depths. He almost called out but was scared that he would distract her, and she would fall.

He gathered himself and set out after her. The edge was only just wide enough to walk on, but wasn't even, and he had to concentrate on his footing. There was a huge drop on both sides. He could only see Charley in his peripheral vision most of the time.

They reached the point where the ridge widened again, and she turned to say something. He gathered her in his arms.

“Oh, do you have a problem with heights? I didn’t know, sorry!” she said.

“No, I was scared for you, my dear. Oh, that was horrible!”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t think. But, you know, the job is that we will have to do will be tricky at times, I’m sure. We can’t be scared for each other all the time.”

“True, but we’re a new team. We need to gain confidence in each other, don’t we? We will need to rely on each other in the future, as you say.”

She nodded.

“I see what you mean. I’m sorry I scared you. I’ve got absolute confidence that we can’t get hurt here, but you don’t have that certainty. You are naturally a sceptic, aren’t you?”

They carried on along the ridge, which rapidly became wider, and eventually they reached Hut Two. It had a full bathroom facilities including a shower, and an extensive kitchen and larder, which was very unusual for a real hut at this sort of elevation. The decor was still rough wood and rugged furniture, and the heating was still a wood burning stove that didn’t need feeding.

“Simon is being kind to us,” laughed Chris.

They ate their meal on the deck of the hut, watching as the sun went down over the mountains to the west. The deck was protected from the wind and weather by glass walls, but apart from that it was just like sitting outside.

“Are you ready to get into this job?” said Charley.

“Yes, whatever it might bring. It’s been a lovely week, but it’s got to end. I’m looking forward to it.”

“Me too. Just so long as we have time for us.”

Later, they drifted off to sleep, with Chris in the top bunk and Charley in the bottom bunk. Charley dropped off first.

“I wonder if I should mention that she snores,” thought Chris.

He thought not. He’d save the fact for when he wanted to tease her. It was actually a quiet soothing noise, and lulled by the sound, he dropped off to sleep himself.

“The next morning we walked back to Campsite One,” said Chris. “There was a button which said ‘Press Me!’, so we did and arrived back at the villa.”

“Simon asked if we’d had fun,” said Charley, “and I thanked him for sending us to such a lovely space. He laughed and said ‘Most of that came from inside you’.”

“Then we stepped back to the hotel,” said Chris. “Simon gave me this little device and told us to get back to our old lives for now. He said that we would soon find our niche. It was a little scary to be honest.”

“He’s been tinkering with that thing ever since,” joked Charley. “We soon moved in together and started to arrange the wedding. Both sets of parents were shocked! We’d only known each other for a week!”

“My Mum was the worst. But when I brought Charley to meet them, she soon sweet-talked them round!”

“Your Mum is lovely! But then one day, soon after the wedding, Chris’ device started bleeping, and we figured out that we were being called. I’d been feeling edgy that day, so we figured that maybe that was also because we were needed.”

“Yeah, when Charley gets irritable, I check my device. Often she feels that we are needed first, before it turns up on my device. Anyway, we stepped, using the device, and found ourselves in a space where technology was really out of hand. Animals, even pets, were frowned on and there were very few trees or even other plants left.”

“Yes,” said Charley. “The kids still wanted pets, though, and many of them kept rats, in spite of the laws and regulations. I don’t usually like rats, but these were cute.”

“It really was horrible though. The air was dirty, the water was dirty. We found the people in charge, and had a talk to them. They tried to put us in jail, but we resisted. Then one of them shot at Charley and I got mad. I stepped us all to the local police station cells and fixed the locks so that they wouldn’t open.”

“Yeah, I caught the bullet in mid-air, and surprised even myself. Then Chris told them that things had to change. He didn’t even threaten them or anything but a surprising number of them suddenly became tree-

huggers. I looked at them and sort of knew who was being honest and who was just being pragmatic. Anyway, they got started tidying up the mess. We went back five years later and things were looking much better, but they still had a way to go. Interestingly, those who were pragmatic about the change of direction were at least as useful as those that were sincere.”

“It sounds much like one of our first ventures into the spaces,” said the Mage. “We found a couple who had powers similar to ours, but they didn’t know it. We left them in charge.”

“So did we!” said Chris. “We still keep in touch.”

“We need to go,” said the Mage.

The Boffin had dropped off to sleep, still holding the baby. He wasn’t worried that she would drop the child, even though she was asleep, but it wasn’t like her to fall asleep like that.

He roused the Boffin and they said their goodbyes. After hugs all round he and the Boffin stepped home.

“I like them,” the Boffin said. “They will do well.”

She looked in the mirror.

“How old do we look now?”

He came and looked at their reflections for a minute.

“It’s hard to tell, though we seem to be ageing rapidly now.”

“I’m tired. I’m going to bed. Coming?”

“Yes, shortly.”

He wandered into his study, but couldn’t remember what he was going to do. He sighed and followed her up to bed. The stairs tested his stiff joints.

Chris and Charley reflected on the visit.

“I’m glad we met them. It’s sort of sad though,” said Charley.

“We have big shoes to fill. What do you think about what they call themselves?”

“Mage and Boffin? It’s sort of cool, isn’t it? Magic and Science. Hmm, Technology and Nature, we told them. Logic and Intuition? I like Magic

and Science. What do you think, dear?”

He nodded.

“Yes,” he said. “I don’t think that they would mind. That makes me the Boffin, and you the Mage. Shall we use those names?”

“Yes, we should. In their honour, and it more accurately describes the roles, too. We should even use ‘Adam’ and ‘Eve’ if it seems appropriate, too.”

And so it was decided.

The next afternoon the doorbell rang.

“Who could that be?” said the Mage. “Nobody we know rings the doorbell!”

He shuffled to the door and opened it. On the doorstep was a very old man, with a white beard and a stick.

“Don’t you recognize me, old friend,” he said.

“Simon! My friend, come in, come in.”

The Mage showed him into the kitchen where the Boffin was just making a cup of tea.

“Simon?” said the Boffin. “Come in. Sit down.”

She gave him a hug.

“How are you Simon? How have you been? Where have you been?”

“That’s a good question, my dear, and one that I can’t really answer. As you can see, I’m ageing fast, just like you. You ask where I’ve been and my best answer is ‘nowhere’.”

“Nowhere?” she asked.

“Yes. You remember the early days, just after the war. I was somehow the King, and you were somehow the Mage and the Boffin? What fun that was! Well, I remember a few years of my reign and then, nothing. Well, nothing until about ten years ago, when I met two young people. I suspect that you know who.”

“Yes, we’ve just been to see them. We think that they will do well, Simon. So what brings you here, now? I suspect that it has to do with us. We are not going to be around much longer.”

“Yes, I know,” said Simon. “And, I suspect, neither am I. I don’t know what will happen when Chris and Charley reach the end of their tenure, in perhaps thousands of years, but I won’t be the one finding their replacements. Although I don’t think that I’ve lived through all the years that you have, I’m tired too.”

“Well, I’m glad you came, Simon. I’m glad that we have had the chance to say goodbye. I’m glad that you picked us.”

“Events picked us, my dear. If free will does exist, and I believe that it does, I don’t think that it was involved in our case. We, none of us, had any choice.”

Simon stayed for a while, and ate one of the Boffin’s cakes, and they chatted for a while. Then they said their farewells, and Simon stepped away. The Boffin’s eyes were wet.

“I’m not hungry, dear. Are you?” said the Boffin.

“Not at the moment, my dear. Shall we sit outside?”

They had an outdoor sofa and settled down to watch the sunset. The Mage put his arm around her, and she leaned against his shoulder. She tried to bring her legs up onto the seat as usual, but the stiffness in her joints made it difficult. She managed after a couple of tries, and couldn’t stop giggling.

She kissed him.

“I wouldn’t change a minute of it.”

“Neither would I. Neither would I.”

They went back to watching the sun setting the clouds on fire, and as it got darker, their breathing slowed, their hearts beat in synchronization, slowing, slowing, slowing, slowing, until they stopped. Leo’s son found them the next morning, still sitting together on the sofa.

Epilogue

So, that is the end of the Mage and the Boffin. At least, that's what I intended when I wrote the last story. But I introduced Chris and Charley as their replacements, thinking that I might write some stories about them.

But if I thought that I had finished with the Mage and the Boffin, I was mistaken. They weren't having any of that! So, more stories of the Mage and the Boffin happened. The stories wrote themselves, and you can find them, and the ones from this compendium on my website (<https://www.cliffp.com/my-writing/>)

Chris and Charley are still waiting in the wings. The way I left it, they were considering calling themselves the Mage and the Boffin, so maybe they will eventually demand their own stories. In the meantime, a few others have elbowed their way in and acquired stories of their own. I'm interested to see what transpires.

So, at the end of this series of stories, the Mage and the Boffin died, but they are still appearing in new stories. There's at least two explanations for this. Either the new stories are from earlier times in their long lives, or the stories are from 'spaces' where they didn't die.

I don't care, either way. I just write the stories as they come to me. I just hope that you enjoy them.

*** THE END ***