

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, 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, even though he wasn’t in 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 realise 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.

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“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 realised 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.