

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 spell 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. Of which there are an infinite number."

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 minimise the devastating effects of the wars.

They favoured 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 in the know called stepping, but 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 realised 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 their studies or laboratories.

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 was really good with spaces. He once found the Boffin when she was stuck in one, 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 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. The joys overrode the horrors of the piles of poo at the bottom of the cave most of the time. They were nice people though.”

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 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, and he realised that 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. He kissed her, and she rested her head on his shoulder. They stayed like that for a long time, until 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 materialised 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 high 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 a great time.

Mouse got his Grandparents' permission and took Moth to the dragons' space. He could have just stepped there, but it seemed polite to ask their permission, 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 an Ogre, though it was obviously more aggressive than those usually peaceful beings. It was just a bit taller than Moth, 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 sung 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 pigpen 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,” he said. “They are already dead so you can’t 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.

“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 gave the wing a careful look, 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 signalled “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. 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.

“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 nut 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 realised 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 older.

Becca sucked her breath in 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 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 realised 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!”
