

## Flickering

“Let’s see your permit, please, sir,” said the Peeler aggressively.

“My permit?” said Alan. He knew nothing about any permit. Where was he?

“Your permit, sir, please. Hurry it up. I haven’t got all day.”

Alan tried the truth. “Sorry, sir. I don’t know anything about a permit.”

The Peeler’s eyes narrowed. He pulled out his radio.

“I’ve got a ‘joe’ without a permit, over,” he said.

The radio mumbled.

“Bringing him in, over and out.”

Pulling out his truncheon, he advanced on Alan.

“No, please. Where do I get a permit, sir?”

Alan backed up until he was against a wall, but the Peeler kept coming. He reached out for Alan.

“What the ..., where did he go?”

The Peeler spun around, but there was no one nearby. He looked at the wall, and even felt it.

“No one’s going to believe me. How am I going to explain this?”

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For Alan, things ‘flickered’. That was his word for it. The Peeler suddenly had a different uniform, and carried a gun, not a truncheon. Then he had a pointed hat with a brim and a stick again. His uniform became a different shade of blue, and he was holding some sort of electronic device, a stunner maybe. He became she. Her uniform was grey with huge epaulettes like flowers. She wore a conventional green blazer. Her skin was white, brown, ebony. She was no longer scowling, but smiling and her hand was a helping hand.

All the time the background changed. Low slums replaced the smart city street, then skyscrapers shot up, to be replaced by grey barrack-like buildings. Then Alan was in a port, on a train, and in a park, then some ruins. He was in a library, a hospital, and in a building with glass display cases along the walls and down the centre. Robes in a large display case on one side faced a suit of armour on the opposite wall. A museum?

“Come along, sir,” said the Tour Guide, no longer a Peeler, no longer hostile, but instead business-like, and eager to continue. “The Castle shuts in half an hour. We need to keep moving.”

The small group followed the Guide into the next room, which had fewer display cases, but more suits of armour lined up against the walls. Swords and old firearms hung from the walls. Signs provided information about the various display pieces.

“And this room holds the armour and weapons of the fourth Earl. The Earl and fifty of his men took part in the battle of ...”

“Where did you come from, son?” asked an older man quietly. “I’m sure that you weren’t on this tour at the beginning.”

“Arrived late. Had to skip the first part. Did I miss much?”

“Only most of it.” The man looked suspiciously at Alan, but moved away and started listening to the Guide, and casting only an occasional glance at Alan.

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Alan called it ‘flickering’ because that is how it seemed to him. Like the flickering of an old film, or a modern film that was intentionally badly spliced or spliced to indicate rapid change. Or a television set that was continually switched from channel to channel. Things always flickered for him if he was caught in a stressful situation like being asked for his permit by the Peeler.

Sometimes, though, they changed for him when he wasn't stressed. Things flickered for him just before he met the Peeler, but so far as he could remember, he hadn't been feeling stressed.

He had found no pattern to the flickering. He cast his mind back to when it all started. He had enrolled in a University some distance from home, and he'd settled into his digs, and started on his courses. He'd also started to make friends and in his spare time had visited the student bar and other places with his new friends. They had eaten fish and chips and visited restaurants that boasted the cuisines of other countries. They'd visited cinemas and theatres. He'd been enjoying his new life when it happened.

He was walking back from the Student Association Building one night when he was set upon by three men. He tried to fight back but was pinned against a tree.

"Give us your wallet," said one of his assailants, showing him a knife with a narrow pointed blade.

He carried his wallet in his back pocket, so he reached down.

"He's going for a gun!" shouted one of the others.

The knife carrier lunged at him and for Alan, things flickered for the first time.

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After his first flickering event, Alan was disoriented, wandering the streets, looking for somewhere, anywhere, that he recognized. He was taken to a hospital, the New Amsterdam Hospital, named after the city and state that it was in, where he was checked over by the doctors and given a bed.

The Police went through his wallet and were puzzled. His driving licence looked valid, but was issued by the state of New York. It was otherwise identical to the local New Amsterdam state driving licences. The address on the licence didn't exist, so they left, to consult their superiors.

Alan checked himself out of the hospital as soon as they had gone. He wandered around the city and chanced on a church which ran a hostel for the homeless, and spent the night there. He was feeling depressed and lost, wondering what had happened to him.

He saw a sign in a restaurant window and was given a job. Mr Liu was not interested in taxes, insurance and paperwork, which suited Alan. After three days he moved out of the hostel and shared a flat with some of Mr Liu's relatives. After a month he was feeling very much better, and was getting used to his new life.

He discovered that to really get on in this world he needed a number. A number that would allow him to get a real job, to sign up with a bank, to get a licence to drive. Mr Liu, whose boat regularly sailed close to the shoals of illegality, told him to just apply, and tell the clerk that his number had been 'lost'.

So Alan, filled in the forms, queued up and was issued with an ID number. He was officially a person! He stopped off on the way back to apply for a driver's licence with his new ID number. He was surprised when the clerk looked at his application, and smiled at him.

"Have you lost your original licence, sir?" she asked. "You are already in the system. You need to request a replacement, not a new one."

Alan, by now, had learned not to show too much surprise. It only caused suspicion. So he apologized and filled in the form for a replacement licence.

"We'll print and send the licence to you in a day or so," said the clerk.

Alan thanked her and returned to his digs. It was as easy as that. He started rebuilding his life. He re-applied for University, got in, restarted his courses, and in a year or two, he had his degree.

He missed his parents of course. Some aspects of his new world corresponded to places in the world from which he came, and he visited the area that he thought corresponded to the place where his parents lived, but there was nothing there that he recognized.

He got a job and said goodbye to Mr Liu. He promised to come back and visit him, because Mr Liu had been a great help to him, although the old man didn't believe his story about the flickering. For a while he did visit the old man every few months, but for one reason or another his visits tailed off.

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One day he found that he had a little spare cash, and he invested in a short session with a psychiatrist. He told the woman his story, and waited for her verdict.

"Hmm," she said. "You're a strange one. You don't seem delusional, and you don't seem like you are telling a tale. If you were delusional, I'd expect your story to be more dramatic. More thunder and lightning. Apart from the 'flickering' everything seems, well, prosaic. If you were telling a tale, even under a delusion, you would likely pad it out with more details, more explanations. In my profession, we develop a knack for telling true statements from statements rooted in delusions. Oh, we're not always right, of course, but I get no sense that your statements spring from a delusion. Yet what you say can't be true."

"What should I do, doctor?" he asked.

She spread her hands. "I don't know. Apart from your ... Well, I'll call it a delusion, but it doesn't seem like one. Apart from your delusion, you seem pretty well-adjusted. Try not to dwell on it."

Alan nodded. "I'll try. But I will always have it at the back of my mind."

When he had gone, she phoned a few of her colleagues, but none of them had come across anything like Alan's case.

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Not long after that things 'flickered' for Alan again. He began to get used to these episodes, and became quicker at integrating himself into the new worlds.

He discovered that if he could get a valid ID, say an Inland Revenue Number or a Social Security Number, he'd find that he would soon be able to re-apply for a driver's licence and might even find that he had a bank account. It was a bit spooky and he wondered if the world was somehow trying to incorporate the anomaly that he was into itself. He didn't want to believe it, but he couldn't deny that it appeared to be happening.

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After Alan finished the tour of the Castle, he once again set about settling in to his new world. It was becoming tedious, and before he really had time to get used his new surroundings, things 'flickered' for Alan again. He couldn't think what the trigger was this time. If there was one.

When it subsided he was sitting on a park bench, in the autumn sunshine. The leaves on the trees were yellow and green, and some had already fallen. The park sloped down to a sluggish river, which was spanned by a bridge with castle-like turrets. A red double-decked bus crossed the bridge, followed by several black taxicabs, and then by another red bus. People were walking about, many of them carrying cameras. The tourists were taking photographs of everything, including Alan on his bench.

"Where did you come from?" asked the girl on the bench.

"Over there," Alan answered, gesturing over his shoulder.

She had startling pink hair and was wearing denim bib overalls, over a green and white t-shirt. Brown lace up boots completed her outfit.

"No you didn't. I was looking that way. How did you get here? Did you step?"

Alan suddenly felt threatened and the flickering started again. He found himself seated on another bench, overlooking a windswept beach. No one was around. He shuddered. It was cold and

he was still feeling shaken. He found that he had a packet wrapped in paper on his lap, and he opened it. It was fish and chips. He started to eat while he considered his options. He'd have to start again from scratch, he guessed. He wasn't looking forward to it.

"Can I have some, please?"

"What?!" He turned and the girl was sitting next to him. She looked frozen, and somehow he wasn't afraid of her any more.

"You followed me! How did you do that?"

"I'm Kat. Who are you?" She delved into the fish and chips.

"Uh, I'm Alan."

"Why did you run off, Alan? I only wanted to talk! And it was about thirty steps. Why did you do that? It was difficult to follow you."

"I didn't run off. Things flicker when I get stressed."

"'Flicker'?"

"Yeah, change. Like we were in a park near a bridge. Then things flickered and we are here."

She paused with a chip halfway to her mouth. "You mean, you didn't do that? Wait, let's get out of here. It's too cold."

She took the chips from him, wrapped them up, and stuck them down the bib of her overalls. Then she put her hand on Alan's arm and they were suddenly in a warmer place. The sun shone, the sea rippled, and a gentle breeze blew. They were sitting in deck chairs in front of a small shack which backed onto the jungle.

"I like it here," Kat said. "My grandparents used to bring me here when I was tiny. It looks like they aren't here at the moment."

She took the fish and chips from her bib and unwrapped them. She put them on the small table between them.

"Go on, dig in. They're yours after all."

He munched on the chips. "You followed me?"

"Yeah. I knew that you were a stepper right away. Oh, there's a dragon," she said, pointing into the sky.

"A dragon?" he said, alarmed.

"Yes. Oh, they're really friendly. I'll take you and show you some later."

"I'm a 'stepper'? I step between worlds? How do I do that?"

"Between spaces. We call them spaces. You can't control it? Wow, that's rough. You must be a natural stepper. Gran and Grandpa taught me how to do it. They reckon that anyone can do it, but most people don't know how. Let's walk along the beach. Come on!"

They walked along the multi-hued sand, paddling barefoot in the shallows.

"There's a pink ring around the sun. And I feel lighter somehow. Is the gravity slightly weaker than back where we, I mean I, come from."

She laughed. "Yes, it is. Lighter than where we come from. Oh, we don't come from the same space, but we must be close neighbours, I think. I am in college in London. That's where I met you. The college is one of the best in the nearby spaces, and my parents didn't mind me moving here. I mean there."

"Your parents... It must have seemed to my parents as if I'd just disappeared. They must have been so worried."

Shocked she turned to look at him. "You've never been back. How long has it been?"

He counted it up. "Five years. Yes, I've never been back. I didn't know what the flickering was about. I still don't, really."

“Five years! I think that I need to get my Gran and Grandpa involved. Is that OK with you?”

“If you think that they can help, yes please! How do we get in touch with them?”

“Let’s go into the shack. I can do it from there.”

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At first glance the shack seemed to be a collection of ill-fitting parts fitted together in a ramshackle way, and one whole side appeared to be supported by a tree.

The other side provided support for a luxurious vine, with flowers and fruit dangling between the lush green leaves. Kat grabbed a fruit and ate it, so Alan did too. It was sweet, with a slightly scented taste. They crossed the veranda and entered through the open door.

Inside, the shack was more comfortable than Alan had expected. There was no hint of the ad hoc nature of the outside. It was all neat and tidy and he could see beds through the two open doors at the back. The large room that took up most of the remaining space held a table and chairs for eating, and a lounge area with comfortable chairs.

Separating the two areas was a counter or bar, on which were two metal boxes. One his mind tagged with the name ‘microwave’, though it had a little flap at the front covered in buttons. Underneath the bench was what Alan thought was a fridge.

The second box on counter had a screen like a small television on top of it, and a coiled cable like a phone cable which connected it a keyboard. Alan had seen keyboards before, of course, but they were usually embedded in some machine or other.

Kat switched on the box and the screen lit up. After a minute or two green text appeared on the television device. Kat typed something and there was a ping.

“What is that, Kat?”

“It’s called a computer. It’s used for sending messages, I think. They’re only just starting to be used back in London, but Gran’s ones are so much more advanced than the ones back there! I just sent her a message on it. Sorry, I don’t know how it works.”

Alan investigated the ‘microwave’. It had the usual pop open door, but there was no turntable, simply a slightly raised square area. There was no timer, but the keyboard was probably used for that. The keyboard was extensive, more like a typewriter keyboard than the usual cryptic buttons that a microwave usually has.

Kat saw him looking at it. “I’ve only ever seen one of those here, in the shack. I think Gran made it. Do you want a snack? Or a drink?”

“Please. Don’t tell me you get food and drink from this?” He was joking of course, but somehow suspected the truth.

“Yeah.” She pulled a booklet from a slot on the side of the ‘microwave’. “What do you want?”

“Uh, a pie? Beef and onion? Can it do that?”

“Just a minute. I expect so.” She scanned the booklet. “Yeah. Drink?”

“Apple juice?”

She typed some things on the keyboard. There was a double ping. Then she typed something else, and there was another double ping.

“It will take a few minutes. You don’t have to use the booklet. The door acts as a computer screen, and pictures come up on it. You can use that if you want.”

“That’s amazing!” said Alan.

“Oh, and if you want a large drink, or a bottle of beer or wine, it will appear in the fridge.”

Much of this seemed almost like magic to Alan. Oh, he’d seen microwave ovens before, and this device might look a lot like one, but it was capable of so much more.

There were two double pings and Kat went to the machine and took out two small trays, one of which held his pie with a small side salad, a knife and fork, and a glass of apple juice. Her tray had a bowl of noodles, some chopsticks and a glass of water with some ice.

They silently ate their food, and Alan reflected on the fact that there were no cupboards.

“I suppose you just put the trays and stuff back in the machine when you’ve finished eating?”

“Yes! That’s exactly it. It gets a bit busy if there are more than a couple of people here, but it’s very useful. Gran tried to explain to me how it works, but most of it went over my head.”

Alan was relieved. He was totally out of his depth. Just then there was another ping.

“That’s Gran! Let’s see what she said.”

They looked at the computer screen. The first line said “Kat: Hi Gran, I’ve a friend here who needs help. I’m at the shack in the dragon space. Can you come, please?”. The second line said “Boffin: Sure. Is tomorrow OK?”.

Kat typed “Great! Yes, Gran. That will be OK. See you. Love.” and hit the big key with ‘Enter’ on it. There was a ping.

“Great! I can show you around!”

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“I think these are Grandpa’s favourites,” said Kat, as they looked down into the cleft in the reef.

They were standing knee-deep in the water on a ledge of coral that jutted out over the cleft. The water surged across the top of the coral as each wave passed. Down in the cleft, seaweed grew in abundance, and there were dragons. Not winged, high in the sky, dragons, but finned and gilled sea dragons. When they had arrived, a dragon had swum up to investigate them, opening its formidably toothed mouth and breathing fishiness over them. Kat scratched it under the chin and at the hinge of its mouth. It looked at Alan, then sank beneath the waves.

There were babies. The adults were constantly herding the youngsters from seaweed clump to seaweed clump. The youngsters foraged furiously in the seaweed, but now and then an adult would return from its own foraging trip with a mouthful of ... something. Crab, fish, or something else nutritious. The babies would fight to extract the best morsels from the adult’s mouth, but the adult would make sure that even the smallest got their fair share.

“Are you OK for a swim?” asked Kat. “I want to see the eggs.”

Alan nodded and they slipped into the water. When he dipped his head into the water, he could hear the clicks, booms, and trills of adults and the squeaks and squawks of the babies. They swam to the head of the cleft. At one point they swam over a branch of the cleft and an adult swam up to investigate them, and then turned back to its charges. Alan felt the pressure wave of its flippers and tail as it turned back.

They reached a point where the cleft ended. There were a few pools, filled and agitated by the waves. Some of them had clutches of eggs, and each clutch had its attendant sea-dragon. The nurse dragons spread their flippers, shading the eggs from the worst of the sun, while the waves continually moved the eggs, back and forth.

Alan and Kat climbed up onto a spur of coral that overlooked a pool, and the nurse dragon reared up between them and the babies, opening her toothy mouth wide.

“Back away slightly and duck your head,” said Kat in a quiet voice.

The nurse dragon went back to shading the eggs, once she had decided that they were no threat. Alan and Kat sat on the coral, watching, but nothing much happened.

“I was here once when one of the babies hatched. It was amazing, and I’ve always wanted to see it again. The nurse helped it out of its shell and then guided it down to the next pool, where the

new-born babies were. They have a comical spike on their muzzles, which Gran says they use to break out of the shell. It drops off after a while, apparently. Seen enough?"

Alan nodded. Kat grabbed his hand and stepped them back to the shack.

"Thanks, Kat," said Alan. "Those sea dragons are amazing! Thanks for showing them to me."

"You're welcome. You know, Gran and Grandpa told me that in some of the clefts, and there are hundreds, some of the baby dragons were dying. The coral was dying, the seaweed was dying, and the babies were all sick and dying."

"Oh no. What happened?"

"Gran and Grandpa called in some friends, and they found that something was wrong with the water. It was short of something because some volcanoes had stopped producing it. Gran and Grandpa and their friends solved it, by seeding the clefts with the chemical. It's all OK now."

Alan nodded. He looked up and down the beach with its multicoloured swirls of sand. He wondered why it didn't get mixed into a single hue by the waves and the wind. Just another puzzle in this fascinating place.

"Let's eat, and then we can walk up the beach a little before it gets dark," suggested Kat.

So they did, and watched the world turn pink for a few minutes as the haloed sun settled into the sea.

While he was lying in bed, Alan reflected on how relaxed he was feeling. He realized that he was always tense, always edgy. Maybe there was always tension in his mind, a wondering about the 'flickering', and what it meant, and when it would happen again. It seemed that tomorrow he might get some answers. Oh, Kat had told him something about it, but Kat was not good on the details. Tomorrow. Then he slid into one of the deepest sleeps of his life.

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Alan woke when the sun was already high, and when he emerged into the living area Kat was already up. He guessed that she had been for a swim as her pink hair was still wet, and she was wearing a bikini. She was eating some sort of muesli.

"Morning," she said. "You slept well?"

"Yeah. Best sleep for a long time. You've been swimming?"

"Yes. The lagoon is lovely. The fish are so tame, they swim round you. Grandpa won't fish in the lagoon."

Alan dialled up bacon, eggs, and toast on the 'microwave'. He figured that they were somehow built or constructed. He didn't know what the word was, but they tasted fine, so he stopped wondering.

After breakfast they swam in the lagoon. As Kat said, the fish were curious and swam around them. Alan thought that the lagoon was like a huge aquarium. It was as if this world, or rather space, was built for humans to enjoy. But that didn't take account of the dragons, both of the sea and of the air. The dragons were their own creatures, and not there just for the enjoyment of the humans. He decided to stop wondering and just enjoy it.

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In the afternoon, Kat took Alan up to see the other sort of dragon. They stood on a flat peak looking over a broken landscape. A huge spire of rock dominated the scene, in a way that would not have been possible where Alan came from because of the high gravity.

"It's almost hollow, Gran and Grandpa told me," said Kat. "The queens all have a nest in the spire and the most senior queen has a nest at the bottom, behind that ledge. Gran and Grandpa are the only humans to have been in there."

Dragons of all sizes were coming and going, in and out of the caves. It was a busy scene. Alan saw two dragons dragging what looked like a large tree trunk into the lowest cave, and other dragons were carrying whole limbs of trees and smaller branches. The same was happening at other holes higher up the spire.

“Hullo, Kat! How are you?” said a voice behind them.

“Gran! I’m OK. Thanks for coming! I know you are busy, but my friend Alan needs some help, if you don’t mind.”

Two people had appeared behind them. Alan couldn’t tell how old they were, but they had the air of a great age about them. They were wearing normal clothes which surprised Alan a little. He’d been expecting robes and wands, white coats and scientific instruments from what Kat had told him about them.

“Sure, dear. Welcome to dragon space, Alan!” said the woman. “We’ll have a chat when we get back to the shack, OK? What’s stirring up the dragons do you think, dear?”

“It looks like they are nest building, my dear. They’re probably preparing for a Mating Flight.” He ran his fingers through his beard.

The woman drew an instrument out of her pocket and tapped a few keys. “Oh, yes, it’s nearly the end of summer here, after all.”

She turned to Alan. “Hullo, Alan, I’m the Boffin, and this is the Mage. How do you like dragon space? Has Kat been showing you round?”

“Yes, thank you. We went to see the sea dragons yesterday. The babies are lovely! Kat was saying that some became sick one time. That must have been horrible!”

The Boffin frowned. “Yes, it was. But it was a simple selenium deficiency, easily cured. Have you seen enough here?”

“Yes, ma’am, thanks.”

“Just ‘Boffin’ will do, Alan. Dear, I’m going to fly back. I’ll see you at the shack.”

The Mage sighed. “OK, my dear. Do you want fish pie for supper?”

“Yes, please,” said the Boffin and stepped off the precipice.

Alan gasped. A female dragon swept up from the depths and bugled, and set off down the canyon towards the sea.

“I wish she wouldn’t do that,” sighed the Mage. “She does like to show off. Oh well, let’s get back. I need to do some cooking.”

They joined hands, the Mage stepped, and they were standing on the veranda of the shack.

“I’m going to have to cheat a little,” said the Mage. “Kat, can you pick four or five of those fruits from the vine, please. Come on, Alan. We can chat while I cook.”

The counter or bench inside the shack was now a proper cooking surface, with a sink, and storage underneath. The ‘microwave’ and fridge were combined into one unit with doors top and bottom. A large fish was lying on a working surface, ready to be cleaned and filleted.

“Normally I would have caught the fish first, but I haven’t got the time. Kat, can you dial up some mashed potato? Oh, and a couple of lemons.”

The Mage set about cooking the fish and constructing his fish pie.

“So, what’s your problem, Alan?”

Alan explained how things ‘flickered’ for him when he was threatened and sometimes when he wasn’t. The Mage listened, nodding, as his hands flew and his dish took shape. Sometimes he got Kat to dial up ingredients, sometimes he pulled them out of drawers.

“Hmm, hmm,” he said. “So you’re a natural stepper but you can’t control it. We can work on that for you. How did you two meet?”

Kat explained how she had noticed Alan stepping into her space, and how she'd followed him when he disappeared.

"Uh-huh! You're studying in London, aren't you, Kat. Nice place. Nice buildings. And I like those red buses!"

Just then a dragon bugled outside. "Here's my wife," said the Mage, as the Boffin walked in the door. "Nice flight, my dear?"

She gave him a peck on the cheek. "Yes thanks, dear. I love to fly as a dragon. I hope that I didn't shock you too much, Alan."

"Alan is at the stage where he'd just accept anything. Even that Kat was actually a goblin."

For a few moments she looked exactly like a pink-haired goblin.

"Grandpa!" She reverted to her normal self.

"Is this ... magic ...?" asked Alan.

The Boffin looked at him. "Oh, you come from a space where the magic is mostly hidden, don't you? Well, some of it is magic, and some science. That, however, was pure illusion. You have charms and talismans where you come from?"

"Yes, we do. But nobody knows if they really work."

"Oh, they do, I assure you. They nudge the probabilities a little, but it's a fairly subtle effect. They give people confidence too, and that often helps. In a science dominated space, like yours, science has managed to explain most magic away, and that reduces the effectiveness of charms. Science never will explain it all, of course, because the magic is always there, in the atoms, the electrons and other particles, and in the quarks, and gluons, and other things. In a sense those things are just little bundles of magic, explained in a scientific way. And magic is still there in the gaps between the scientists' theories and reality, small though those gaps may appear."

She turned to her husband. "The 'multiple worlds' talk?" she asked. "I'll finish the pie."

He nodded. "The 'multiple worlds' talk," he agreed. "Let's take a walk along the beach, Alan."

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The Mage and Alan walked along the beach, and the Mage explained to Alan about the multiple worlds theory, though he called them 'spaces'.

"Any sentient and some semi-sentient species can step between spaces, Alan, but most humans don't know how. The Boffin and I aren't sure why humans, and for that matter, the simians and semi-sentient species, forgot about it, since it happened a long time ago, even before the Boffin and I came on the scene."

"Semi-sentient species? Like the dragons?"

The Mage looked at him. "The dragons are a sentient species, Alan. They communicate using sounds, like the bugle sound, and by body language. By our measures they are sentient. Besides, the Boffin and I have **been** dragons. We know."

"Sorry, sir."

"That's OK. Gnomes are semi-sentient, though some tribes are probably fully sentient. Some trolls are not very bright, but funnily enough, they are definitely sentient. Some other races straddle the line, but dragons are definitely sentient."

Alan had obviously made a bad mistake and all he could do was apologize again.

"Never mind," said the Mage. "Let's work on your stepping. You somehow know how to do it, but you can't control it. Mmm?"

"Yes, sir."

"Just call me 'Mage', son. OK, let's see if you can take us to the peak near the dragons' spire. Hold my hand."

“OK,” said Alan, nervously. “Here goes.”

Everything flickered, and they found themselves on the peak. The sun was setting in the west, but it was not yet low enough for the pink twilight. Few dragons were about, or so Alan thought. Then he realized that many of the peaks had dragons roosting on them, blending into the rocks.

“Well, that was interesting,” said the Mage, stroking his beard. “All those brief stops along the way. Is it always like that for you?”

“Yes, though this is the first time I’ve done it on purpose. And the first time I stepped to somewhere that I wanted to be!”

“Hmm, very odd. Can you take us to here?” The Mage held Alan’s hand and passed the location to him.”

“Oh, yes! I see. Let me try.”

He stepped, but things stilled flickered before they arrived at an observation platform above a sea of trees. In the sky hung a planet, as red as dust, with great swirls in its russet clouds.

“The Forests of Llun. Well, we got here! But we still went the long way round.”

“What’s the red planet, Mage? Is it Mars?”

“No, that’s the Earth. We are standing on the Moon. The people here escaped from the Earth just before it was destroyed by their stupidity. Let’s move on. They are not friendly to strangers, because they are, of necessity, a tightly controlled society. Try taking us to here. Get it clear in your mind.”

“OK, I’ll try.”

Things flickered, and they were standing on a pale green track, or so it seemed. A darker green shoulder flanked both sides of the track. At intervals along the track smaller tracks diverged from the main track over the shoulders. These smaller tracks were indented into the green shoulders. The shoulders were pocked with holes about a hands-breadth in diameter. Whip like structures stood erect here and there. Alan thought that he had seen something like this before, but where? He realized that everything was gently moving up and down.

“Oh, we’re on a huge leaf,” he said, before realizing that it sounded silly.

“Yes, we are,” said the Mage. “But let’s move on. The bugs here can be quite aggressive, and they are big. Here, I’ll take us on the next step. See if it feels different to when you step.”

Alan had time to see other leaves, further away, and even some huge stalks, ten metres or so around, before they stepped.

“Yes, that did seem different,” he said. “I don’t know how, though. Where are we?”

“I don’t know what you would call it,” said the Mage. “It’s a space with not much in it.”

Everything was white. The light source, which Adam couldn’t locate, provided just enough contrast to pick out the slight differences, the slight hillocks and dells. They walked down a slight decline.

“Every space seems to have people, or at least a sentient species. But we’ve never seen anyone or anything here. It’s an anomaly.”

“Maybe the space itself is sentient?” Alan said.

The Mage nodded. “Yes, that had occurred to us. We haven’t been able to communicate with it, if that is so. It’s a puzzle.”

Alan considered. “Maybe you can only step to spaces that contain sentient beings. There must be at least as many spaces where sentience didn’t evolve as there are where it did.”

“That’s true. We’d considered that. But in that case why can we step to this one? If it is empty of sentient life.”

The Mage stroked his beard. "Can you take us to here," he said, holding Alan's hand and passing him the essence of a different space. "And concentrate on the way that it was different when I stepped."

"I'll try."

There was a flicker or two, but they arrived at the new space with fewer brief stops. They were clinging to the bark of a huge tree.

"Whoa! Won't we fall?"

The Mage took a coin from his pocket and dropped it. It curved into the trunk of the tree instead of falling down parallel to the trunk.

"This is a strange space," he said. "My wife, the Boffin, was fascinated by it at first, but she soon had the major characteristics described in her equations. She still considers it an anomaly, though. As do I, for slightly different reasons."

An inhabitant of the space passed them heading down, head first. Alan thought of him as sloth-like, though he moved fairly fast. They nodded a greeting as he passed.

"Gravity pulls him in the opposite direction to us. It's an individual thing here."

Alan noticed that he had claws and that the claws were embedded deeply into the tree. He looked at the Mage and then at himself. They were both sloth-like.

"In some spaces," commented the Mage, as he sharpened his claws on a rough outgrowth of the tree, "you take on the characteristics of the dominant species. This is one of those spaces. Don't worry about it. Now, can you take us to here?"

They locked claws, and Alan stepped them to the indicated space.

"That's better," said the Mage. "No flicker."

They were in a long empty tunnel.

"Hmm, this is an underground space. I don't much like these, as the populations tend to be small, and they are often suspicious of strangers. A few more steps, and I think that you will have it."

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The Mage and Alan walked back along the beach. When they entered the shack, the Boffin waved distractedly at them as she watched a semi-transparent version of the Mage cooking.

"Almost finished," she said.

"Oh, she's got a ghost of me cooking for her. She does love my version of fish pie! She has to concentrate or my ghost will fade away."

"How did it go?" asked Kat.

"Pretty good," said the Mage. "He can now control his stepping. He'll still step in an emergency, as many steppers do, but he won't 'flicker' through a dozen or so spaces when he does so. Keep an emergency space in your mind, Alan. You are welcome to use here for that purpose."

They settled down to eat the Mage's fish pie. It was very good.

"I owe a lot to Kat," said Alan. "If she hadn't seen me stepping and hadn't bothered to follow me, I would probably still be 'flickering' through the spaces."

Kat briefly squeezed his hand. "You're welcome. I'm glad I was able to help."

"There's just one thing..." Alan said.

"What's that?" asked the Boffin.

"Well, I wish that I could get back to the space that I started from. My parents must have wondered what happened to me. They must be so sad."

"But that's not a problem," said the Mage. "Look inside yourself. You can always return to the space that you came from."

"Ah!" Alan said, shocked. "Yes, of course. Of course. How could I not know?"

“Has it been long?” asked the Boffin.

“I don’t know! More than five years.”

“You’ll have to go back. In the morning?” said Kat.

“Yes. Please will you come with me, Kat?”

She nodded.

“There’s just one thing,” said the Boffin.

“What’s that?”

“You’d better have a good ‘explanation’ for your disappearance ready.”

“Yes, that’s true.”

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Kat and Alan stepped to a small alleyway near to where Alan’s parents lived. They walked round the corner and up to the small suburban house. A woman wearing a straw hat was weeding a flowerbed in the front garden, and didn’t see them coming.

“Mum,” said Alan.

The woman looked up in shock.

“Alan? Alan!” She jumped up and wrapped her arms around him.

He hugged her back.

“I’m sorry. I’m really sorry.”

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