

## The Dichotomy

The Mage and the Boffin were coming back from a conference in a distant space. Well, it was really an informal gathering of all known couples that were like them. People of power, embodiments of Science and Magic, or Technology and Nature, or similar complementary paradigms. Usually the couples were male and female, but sometimes they were both male or both female.

“That was interesting,” said the Boffin.

“Yeah. The new couple? Moh and Decca?” said her husband.

She nodded.

“Are we reaching the edges of the human range, do you think?”

He considered. “Maybe. It’s hard to tell. They definitely had a slightly different type of aura to the other couples.”

“Aura? Their elbow joints worked slightly differently to usual human elbows. Their skins seemed to have a different texture. Nice people though. Couldn’t eat cheese.”

“Yeah, that too! Mind you, there’s plenty of humans who can’t eat cheese. Mmm! Do you remember when it was just us. So far as we knew.”

“Yes. And now, well, there were about one hundred couples there, weren’t there, each with their own range of spaces to look after.”

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The Boffin and the Mage called them spaces. We might call them Universes. The Boffin and the Mage travelled between them by ‘stepping’, which meant that objectively they disappeared from one space and appeared in another. Subjectively, it felt to them like taking a step.

Spaces which were ‘near’ to each other were very similar, sometimes right down to a single leaf on a single tree, and ‘distant’ spaces differed in significant ways. The Mage and the Boffin had never found another Mage and Boffin in nearby spaces, but they had found others with similar powers to themselves in more distant spaces. They thought that some sort of ‘exclusion principle’ ensured that they would never meet their doppelgängers.

The Mage and the Boffin considered that they had been given their powers for a reason, so they used them, sparingly, to help people in the nearby spaces. In the beginning, as they stepped to more distant spaces, they started to find others with powers similar to theirs, starting with Terry and Kitty, and now they knew many couples similar themselves. The power couples had started visiting each other, holding gatherings, hosting parties, and, now and then, helping each other out.

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When the Mage and the Boffin attended a gathering which was distant from their home space, they took the opportunity to stop off a few times on the trip back. They would stop at a space and have a look around. Sightsee. They had found some interesting spaces while doing this, and had had quite a few adventures.

This time they ended up in a space which seemed to be underground, which wasn’t, in itself, unusual. Even though it appeared to be underground, it seemed spacious. The walls were glowing

red and purple in places, and in others there were veins of solid black. The colours moved slowly over the walls like the colours in a burning fire.

The cavern where they had appeared extended about a hundred metres or so in all directions, and many tunnels led off it. Some of them curved upwards, others led downwards. Some were almost level and some disappeared into the roof or floor. The Boffin thought that it was a little like being inside a red and purple sponge. Trickle of a red liquid flowed from some tunnels, sometimes into other tunnels, sometimes into pools which steamed. It was literally as hot as a furnace, which didn't affect the Mage and the Boffin in the least, of course.

"Lava?" said the Mage.

"Looks like it. Where are we?"

"Let's ask whoever it is who is whistling."

"Yeah."

They entered one of the more level of the tunnels. It twisted and turned and the Mage wondered at first if it was piping the sounds from a distance, but they rounded a turn, and entered a large chamber with a raised square platform. On top of the platform was a very human house, made of red brick, tiled with grey slates.

The individual who was whistling was mowing a lawn of red to purple grass. When he turned and headed towards them his whistling faded away and he stopped as if astounded. The Mage and the Boffin walked up some steps and onto the colourful grass.

"Hullo, I'm known as the Boffin. He's known as the Mage. Pleased to meet you."

She held out her hand.

"You're the what?" said the individual with the mower. "He's what?"

The Boffin repeated her introduction.

"Ah. Oh. Erm. Sorry. We don't get many visitors here. I'm, erm, Zack. Zachary. At least that's what He calls me. I'm not sure. It's been so long."

"Nice house, Zack."

"Thank you. The Boss can't do greens and blues, but He does His best."

"The Boss?"

"Yeah. The Devil. Beelzebub. Lucifer."

"Oh, I see! Then this must be Hell."

"Yeah. The Underworld. Hades. The Abyss. Etc."

"I must say that I would have expected to see more people here."

"Souls, you mean. Yeah, well, He can explain that. Do you want to meet Him?"

"Satan? Yeah, sure. Can we?"

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The Devil looked like a middle-aged man, slightly balding, with a bit of a belly. For all that he had a presence, a charisma. He was lounging on a large well padded chair, in a large open cavern. A desk and office chair stood nearby, with some filing cabinets, and a white board which just hung in the air. It was an office, without walls.

“Who did you say you were? Mage and Boffin? Hmm.”

“Yes. What should we call You?”

“Lucifer will do.” He turned to Zack. “Can you make us some tea, please, Zack?”

Zack disappeared through a doorway, which, the Mage thought, was not there until it was needed.

“Well, Mage and Boffin, please sit down. How did you get here? I can tell that you didn’t arrive by the usual method, which is by dying.”

The Mage and the Boffin sat down in the chairs that were suddenly there.

“Do you know about ‘spaces’, Lucifer?” asked the Mage.

“Yeah, well, I know everything, just as He does. I could know how you got here but I prefer to know it by asking you. I don’t get to chat much. Except with Zack, of course.”

The Boffin finished explaining how they had got there, just as Zack brought the tea.

“Thanks, Zack,” said Lucifer.

A chair appeared for Zack, as did a coffee table. Zack put his tray down, served the tea, and took his seat.

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“I’m surprised that this place is so empty,” said the Boffin. “I mean, all those souls who have sinned. Where are they?”

“Oh, that!”

He gestured and the place was filled with souls undergoing extreme torments. Their screams filled the air. Demons flew through the air inflicting horrible punishments on the souls in their care. Lucifer gestured again and things were quiet again. He sighed.

“Sinners, which means everyone, basically, spend an eternity in torment. But we are outside of time, so an eternity is meaningless. Besides, He forgives everyone, and who am I to disagree?”

“‘He’?”

“God. I believe that you’ve talked with Him?”

“Oh yes. Some time ago. The Goddess came back while we were there.”

“Yeah. He’s been much more relaxed since she came back.”

“Is there a Devilless, Lucifer? If you don’t mind me asking.”

“Yeah, Lily. Lilith. She’s around somewhere. Sulking probably.”

“The Boss and Lily are always fighting,” said Zack.

Lucifer scowled him, but he continued.

“Lightning, thunder, explosions, and, er, what’s the opposite of explosions, Boss?”

“Implosions,” said the Devil. He seemed to have forgotten that He was annoyed with Zack.

“Yeah, implosions. Earthquakes, eruptions. Smoke, steam, noxious fumes. That sort of stuff.”

“But We’re a couple, nevertheless. Well matched.”

“Besotted with each other. Always have been, and, naturally, always will be.”

The Devil was suddenly about three metres tall. His body rippled with muscles, and His skin glowed crimson,

“That will do, Zack,” He said in a thunderous voice.

“If you say so, Boss.” Zack was obviously not daunted, but he shut up.

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The Boffin sipped her tea. Lucifer was back to His middle-aged man aspect.

“God told us that He came to exist because humans believed in Him, and that once He existed, He had always existed,” said the Boffin. “How did You come to exist, Lucifer?”

“Oh much the same. Humans, having thought up God, thought up an anti-God. God creates all the good things. Like lovers, crops, animals, quaint little seaside towns. Kids. So where did all the dirty industrial cities come from? Where did pain, sickness, childbirth, treachery, lying, deceit come from? Pollution. Old age. Wars and stuff. Kids again. So, I existed, and had always existed. I’m simplifying, of course. In the early days, there were multiple gods, some benevolent, and some malevolent, and some who were neither. They sort of condensed into Him and Me. He and I are supposed to always fighting for supremacy. It’s not like that of course. We actually strive for balance.”

“So, how do You get along? You and God.”

“Oh, pretty well, actually, person to person. Oh, Lily and I often drop by. He can be a bit, erm, what’s the word, Zack?”

“Which one, Boss? ‘Priggish’ is one of Your favourites. ‘Scoundrel’ is one of His, Boss. ‘Unimaginative’ is another one You use a lot.”

“OK, Zack. OK.”

“Do you mind that He cast You out of Heaven, Lucifer?”

“What? Oh, that old story. Nah! Heaven is more of a concept than a real place. Just like Hell is. Oh, they both ‘exist’. After all, you are here, but they’re not like real physical spaces. What did you think of Heaven?”

“Heaven? We met God on a battlefield. A real one, I think. Then He took us to His home. It was like a large house in a meadow. The meadow sloped down to a river. It was a nice place.”

“Oh, that’s how you saw it, was it? ‘Nice’. Well, I’ve got nothing against nice, I quite like nice. What do think of this place. Honestly.”

The Mage looked around. The structure of Hell was impressive, he thought. There was a certain grandeur in the tunnels, and the streams and pools of lava. The red and black colours were a little monotonous, though. He wondered what to say.

“It’s ‘nice’, isn’t it?” said the Devil gloomily.

“Er, yes, but if I might suggest...”

The Devil nodded.

“How about sulphur yellows? Cupric blues and greens? Like the colours around volcanic vents. Zack says that You can’t create, but You can copy that, can’t you?”

The Devil smiled. “Yes, that would brighten things up, wouldn’t it?”

He gestured and Hell became more like the inside of a volcanic vent. Some of the pools were obviously filled with hot and caustic water. Fumes issued from vents everywhere. They all coughed.

“Sorry!”

The fumes still wafted over them, but no longer affected them.

Lucifer was pleased. “That’s much better! I had a hand in making those volcanos and the volcanic areas, of course! I didn’t think to make Hell like them.”

“And, the lava areas. The pools could bubble, and oh, yes, there could be lava stalactites and stalagmites,” continued the Mage. “And we once visited a space much hotter than our own space. They had lava animals and lava vegetation.”

“I can do the stalactites and stalagmites. But I’d need God’s help to create life. I’ll have to ask Him next time I see Him. Thank you, Mage. Thank you.”

“But you showed us this place full of souls being tortured, and all sorts of demons flying about. Oh, that was just an illusion, wasn’t it?” asked the Boffin.

The Devil nodded.

“You said that God had pardoned everyone. Where did they go then? There wasn’t any sign of them when we met God.” said the Mage.

“Oh, He recycles them. You know, reincarnation. He’s always hoping that they will improve over time. Of course they don’t. It’s the dichotomy, but even though He **knows** that, He chooses not to know it.”

“How can He both know it and not know it? That seems to be a contradiction.”

“Really? It’s not that hard. Humans do it all the time! Cognitive dissonance.”

The Mage had to concede the point.

“What is this ‘dichotomy’, Lucifer?” asked the Boffin. Of course, she had a good idea.

“Oh, it’s fundamental. More fundamental than God and I. Deeper than plus and minus. More than everything and nothing.”

“I see,” said the Boffin, nodding. “It’s easy to say that before anything existed, there was nothing. But ‘nothing’ in this context is not a thing, a state. It’s not just the absence of anything,

including space-time. It's like a cup of coffee. If you drink the coffee, it is empty, and you can say that the cup has nothing in it. But if the cup didn't exist, then talking about coffee and the emptiness or otherwise of the coffee cup is meaningless. Or hypothetical at the very least."

"Yes, exactly. The Great Dichotomy is existence and non-existence. This, in my belief, forces other smaller dichotomies. If there is matter, there must be anti-matter. If there is a positive particle, there is also a negative particle. If there are positive numbers, there must be negative numbers. If you draw a circle, all points must be inside or outside. If you have good, evil is inevitable."

"What about the points on the circle? What about zero?"

"Oh, that's easy. On the one hand we have the positive and negative numbers, and on the other hand, the zero the one number which is a number that isn't positive or negative. A dichotomy.

"Then there are the points that are on the circle and those that aren't. Once again, a dichotomy."

"So, if there is a God, there must be an anti-God? If there is good there must be evil. Nothing can exist without its counterpart existing. Somewhere there must be an anti-Boffin, and an anti-Mage." mused the Mage.

"Is it just that we don't notice if there is only one of something? If it is universal?" wondered the Boffin.

"Like a fish doesn't notice the water it's in?" said Lucifer. "That's an interesting thought. Without going omniscient on you, I don't know. I'd say, off the top of my head, that effectively it wouldn't exist. But of course the fish/water analogy breaks down if you take it too far. The fish would be able to feel it as they swam through it, so they could deduce that water existed."

"What if I make something? That would be unique. Oh, no, of course. The anti-Mage would make an anti-thing."

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This was the sort of conversation that the Mage and the Boffin loved. Although they couldn't really draw any definite conclusions from the discussion, they enjoyed it. At some stage, the Devil conjured a table and a meal.

"Basically, I 'borrowed' this meal from Him. I can't create things but I can copy them. If I create copies of living things, though, they turn out dead. They lack the spark. The only things round here that could be classified as living are ourselves, Lily and Zack."

"How do you come to be down here, Zack, if you don't mind me asking?" said the Mage.

"Oh, the Boss needed someone to be Boss of, and so the Other Guy created me. Actually I'm the last in a long line. When we have nothing new to say to each other, the Boss will send me back to the Other Guy and I'll get recycled. Reincarnated. I won't remember being here. The Boss will find another human down here. An Alex or an Andrew. Even possibly an Adam! To be followed by a Boris and a Clive, in due course, no doubt. Or a Bessie and a Chloe, of course."

"Yeah," said Lucifer, "It's one of His better ideas. Lily is often not about, as She is as busy as I am, and Zack keeps Me company. Lily doesn't need company like I do."

"This doesn't worry you, Zack, living with the Devil?"

“No, I like it here. I’m already dead, so what’s the worst that could happen? Oh, torture and torment, of course, but the Other Guy has forgiven me, so that is out. I’ve a feeling that my life was eventful, though, but, of course, I can’t remember it.”

“Lives,” said Lucifer.

“Yeah, lives, Boss. Besides, I’m here to give the Boss some conversation, and to make the place look less empty.”

“Couldn’t you make imps or demons, Lucifer?”

“Yes, I could, but I can’t create life. I could create imps and demons, copying the imaginings of humans, but they would be mere automata. I do use them sometimes in hauntings and things like that, but after a few hours they just become annoying. Not a single thought in their heads. Lily sometimes uses one to do her hair or makeup.”

Zack was nodding. “We used them for games, once, didn’t we, Boss? Seven a side football, but you had to keep your mind on all of them at once, otherwise they’d wander off. It was more bother than it was worth. The Other Guy is totally against giving them any sort of life.”

“Excuse me, Lucifer,” said the Boffin, “but you don’t appear very evil, if you don’t mind me saying.”

Suddenly Lucifer was at least five metres tall. His skin was dark red, glowing and his body was muscular. He had a strong tail which whipped backwards and forwards destroying the table and throwing everything that was on it into the air. He reached forward and grabbed the Mage and the Boffin. The Boffin heard the Mage’s bones crack. He screamed.

“You dare, madam! You dare to say that the Devil doesn’t appear very evil! You will suffer for that!”

The pressure her body was immense, but she stared back at the Devil.

“I see,” she said. “The evil is an aspect of You, much like God’s all powerful goodness is an aspect of Him. When we saw Him, He appeared to be a fairly normal human. I’d guess that if we had seen His Godly aspect, we would have been blinded, and we would have been transformed by the experience. But He was interacting with us on the human level, so He showed us that aspect of Himself. I’d say that, similarly, You have restricted Your aspect to the human level while we have been talking, and that if you showed your full Devilish aspect, then I would by now be a speck of ash.”

The Devil threw back His head and laughed. His laugh was like a bellow and enveloped her in noxious fumes.

“Well said, Boffin. Well said.”

There was a sort of click or pop, and they were all seated around the table again. The Boffin sipped her glass of wine. The Mage cautiously rubbed his ribs and took a sip of his wine.

Lucifer said “I’ve enjoyed our talk, but I think that you had better continue your travels. I hope that you’ve enjoyed your visit?”

“Yes, very much,” said the Mage. He was still rubbing his ribs, but didn’t seem to be in pain. He seemed more curious than anything else.

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They were just saying their goodbyes when a woman walked out of one of the tunnels.

“Lilith!” said Lucifer. “I’m glad you turned up. Lily, I’d like you to meet the Mage and the Boffin. They’ve just dropped in for a visit.”

Lily walked over to them. She was the embodiment of predatory sexual appeal. She didn’t walk so much as prowl. Her body moved sinuously as She walked, and Her dress emphasized Her every curve and movement as She walked towards them. Her lips glowed as red as blood, Her blonde hair shimmered and the Boffin wondered how She could walk on such high heels. Even the Boffin felt Her overpowering allure.

“Dial it down a bit, please, Lily!” said Lucifer.

“What? Oh, yes. Sure, dear.” Her appearance was that of a normal woman, a bit past her prime, but attractive nonetheless.

“Sorry, We don’t get many visitors down here. How did you get here? You obviously didn’t die.”

The Boffin described briefly how they had happened to step here.

“Oh, I see,” Lily said. “Lucifer and Zack have been looking after you? I wish that I’d known you were here.”

“Thank you, yes. We may come and visit some other time, if You like. I’d like to see more of this place.”

“Oh, yes! That would be great! We don’t see many people down here. Who was the last one, my dear?”

“That Snowman. Remember him? We had to make a frozen Hell for him while he was here! That was interesting! Though he wasn’t an ordinary person, was he? The last ordinary person to come here was probably Zack!”

“Well, my dear, I can tell that the Boffin and the Mage are not ordinary people either! Though in a different way.”

She turned back to the Mage and the Boffin.

“By the way, is the change in the décor your idea? I like it.”

They nodded.

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The Mage and the Boffin stepped back to their kitchen-living room in their cottage.

“That was interesting,” said the Boffin. “Do your ribs hurt, dear?”

He was feeling his ribs again.

“No, my dear. It’s curious. I’m sure that the Devil broke my ribs, and maybe my spine, and it should have hurt, but it didn’t, and they feel like they should hurt now, but they don’t. It’s just a lingering mental echo, I believe. Curious!”

“We were never in any danger,” said the Boffin. “He wouldn’t harm visitors, especially as we were providing Him with an interesting conversation! He demonstrated a little of His powers, of

course, but when you screamed and your bones cracked, that sent a chill down my spine. It gave me an insight into his true nature. He knew that I would see past his physical demonstration, but the emotional aspect of it, you being hurt, would get through to me. But it was hard to stay rational with him at that moment!”

“Yes, I believe that you are right. We weren’t in any danger. What did you make of Lilith?”

“Well, we didn’t get to talk to Her much. When She came in, She was lit up like a searchlight, but when Lucifer mentioned it, She ‘dialled it back’, and became just an attractive woman. Aspects again, I guess. If we visit again, we should talk to Her a bit more.”

“Yeah. And we could talk to Zack some more. I think there’s more to his story.”

“It’s not being nosy, is it?” asked the Boffin.

“No, I don’t think so. They seemed happy to see us and to tell us about Themselves. They don’t see many people like us, do they?”

“Should we invite that new couple from the gathering over? I’d love to learn more about them!”

The Mage nodded. He’d been thinking that himself.

“There’s probably a queue,” he said.

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