

A Sailor on the Endless Sea of Stars

“I was a sailor. I sailed the endless sea of stars, hopping from galaxy to galaxy, from star cluster to star cluster, from star system to star system, even from Universe to Universe, looking for that rarest of phenomena, self-organised matter. Matter with the capacity for metabolism, growth, reaction to stimuli, and reproduction. In short, life. And specifically, the type of life termed ‘intelligent’ life. The sort that creates civilizations and which builds cities and collects knowledge.”

The Boffin looked at the Mage. She’d simply introduced herself and the Mage.

“So, do you have a name, sir,” asked the Mage.

“Name? I do not know if I had one when my story started, but many people have given me names. A name is but a label, but sometimes there is an essence, a meaning that attaches to a name and to the person who is given or adopts it, or vice versa. On this very planet, one man to whom I talked called me Azathoth. But I’m no ruler, and I’m no god.”

The Mage reflected that if you gave him a sentence, you would get a paragraph back, but the man, if he was a man, was not pompous.

They were sitting in the bar of their local inn. The Mage and the Boffin had dropped in on their way back from the weekly market, and since the place was busy they had had to share a table.

“Would you mind if I scanned you, um, Azathoth?” asked the Boffin.

She brought out her favourite device.

“Please feel free, ma’am. I think that you will find that I register as a normal person on your instrument. When I have a body it conforms to the local norm, which in this case appears to be a bipedal upright ape-like creature. That’s very common, so I guess that this ‘human’ model naturally arises, and comes to rule planets of this sort. I assume that species related to the human race, have more hair? They usually do.”

The Boffin’s scan did show that their companion was human, but she wasn’t fooled by this. The device did inform her that some data points that it had obtained were unusual, but not unknown in other people. The Mage drew out his scrying ball and looked into it.

“Magic?” asked Azathoth with interest. “Ah, this orb, I mean planet, seemed to me to be tracking in its course guided mostly by physical forces. Of course, that’s just one way to look at it, I know, and a society which is magic-oriented would regard this earth as guided around the sun by magical urges, spells. But you would talk about gravity, I think.”

“Yes, exactly,” said the Mage. “The tendency is to seek a physical reason for things, and even I do it, but the magical viewpoint is still quite common here.”

“What about you, Azathoth. Do you favour the magical or physical viewpoint?”

Azathoth stared into space. “My viewpoint is holistic. I see the smallest electron exploding the biggest star. I see the smallest wish moving the biggest mountains. I see a dream resulting in a talented child who will change the world. I see the wave of a hand or a flipper or a tentacle or a tapping beak expressing emotion and affecting the future.”

He produced a small ball of fire in his cupped hands, but no one else in the bar seemed to notice.

“No physics,” said the Boffin.

“No magic,” said the Mage.

“Or both,” said Azathoth.

“Why are you looking for intelligent life, Azathoth?” asked the Boffin. “Why are you ‘sailing the endless sea of stars’?”

The Mage and the Boffin had taken him home with them. It was customary with them to bring interesting people home, so that they could indulge in deeper discussions with them in more comfortable surroundings.

“I don’t know,” sighed Azathoth. “I, like you, seek out the interesting people, the people of power and wisdom. Those who feel the undercurrents of the Universes. Though in some cases ‘people’ is not a good word. I’ve communed with colonies of bacteria, in some sort of limited Universe. Maybe what this world would call a Petri dish. I’ve shared gusts of elements with clouds of gas and stars and received their replies in the form of streams of plasma of their own. I’ve done more exotic things with dark matter beings at the very edge of science and magic, on the very edge of being and communication, on the very edge of life and non-life.”

“Maybe you are assembling parts of the answer, like a sort of jigsaw puzzle. Maybe when you learn enough, it will all make sense.”

Azathoth laughed. “Maybe. I’m gaining knowledge all the time, it’s true. But is that progress or merely an illusion of progress. And I only have the lifetime of the Universes to work with. Maybe there is not enough time. The Big Bang to the heat death or the Big Crunch. Or whatever happens at the end. That is only the physical side of things, too. The first charm, which caused the Big Bang and was caused by it, to the last spell, the one that causes things to end or maybe just stop. Even magic is in thrall to time. Sometimes I think that, somehow, I must transcend time in some way to determine my purpose, whatever it might be.”

“Transcend time? It certainly does set a limit on things. Space is limited by time. For example, how far could you travel between the beginning and the end of time? The Universes, which we call spaces, appear to be limited by the speed of light.”

“Yes. I met a race of gaseous beings once who pointed that out. Their Universe didn’t have a lot of space, but had a vast amount of time, because the speed of light was so low. An interesting place.”

“You said ‘ I sailed the endless sea of stars’. Have you stopped then, Azathoth?” asked the Mage.

“I’m still a sailor of the stars, and places where there are no stars. I step from place to place, at random. Or as random as I can make it. A drunkard’s walk, except that I am little affected by alcohol and what humans term drugs! I’ve stepped into atoms and sub-atomic particles, and I’ve stepped out to the wild spaces where Universes perform something like the function of those unimaginably small particles. I am using terms which apply in this set of Universes of course, but the analogy is pretty good. I thought that I had come across something significant when I found a Universe or space where there were dragons. There’s something special about dragons. Do you have dragons here?”

“We know of dragons. There are none here, but we know a place, a space or Universe where they exists!”

“You do? You understand the gladiatorial instincts, the pitting of force against force, the shedding of another’s life force to build up your own? The joy of combat, the despair of crushing defeat and the exultation of ending the life of a foe?”

“Ah, no. It must be a different space. The dragons we know are only combative during a mating flight, and even then they don’t try to end the life of a rival.”

Azathoth looked into the distance. “I have seen many places. I’ve consulted many sages. I’ve talked to the common folk. I’ve talked with gods. I’ve talked to midwives, doctors, priests, soldiers, mathematicians, and potion makers. Kings and paupers. I’ve looked under stones and in babies’ smiles. I’ve looked at the whorls on the thumbs or the equivalent of thumbs on the hands or appendages of many creatures. I’ve looked at evil and good, and found little difference between them in the long run. I still don’t know what I am looking for. I don’t know if I am looking in the right places.”

He sighed.

The Mage said “Maybe, like the man in the legend who rolled a rock up a mountain only for it to roll down again, you are destined not to succeed. Had you thought of that?”

“Yes, I’ve often thought of that. I’ve been travelling for a long time.” He scratched his ear. “Maybe forever, whatever that means. I’ve not come close to even knowing what it is that I am looking for. I was with a tribe of ants one time. I was part of the tribe or nest, and I, as part of the nest, asked the rest of the nest for their opinion. It was quite divisive, disrupting for the nest actually. What was I looking for? The consensus was that it was impossible to know. The question didn’t really make sense. Did it not make sense in the context of the tribe, I wonder, or did it just not make sense?”

The girl watched the young man as he walked up the road from the next village. The road looped around the green passing a row of cottages before it took a turn and passed between the chapel and the Pastor’s cottage.

“Would you like to buy one of my toffee apples, sir?” the girl asked.

She could see that the man was tired, dusty from the road. She reassessed his age. From a distance he looked older, but close up, she guessed his age as a year or two older than her. He was tall and handsome, with dark hair and dark eyes, and but there was something austere about him.

He shifted his gaze from a contemplation of the small village fair to the girl. His eyes were dark, very dark brown, she discovered., but then he smiled and his smile warmed her heart.

“Ah, yes, sure, thanks,” he said, feeling around in his pocket for the money. “What’s it for?” he asked, gesturing with his apple.

“Books for the school. Repairs to the chapel. That sort of thing.”

They wandered through the small fête, the girl selling her apples as they went. She laughed at his attempts to snare a prize with a quoit and he laughed with her. She was slim, with light brown hair

and hazel eyes. She was never far away from a smile, and her smile drew smiles from everyone around her. Her name was Vanessa and he called her 'Nessa' and she called him 'Aza'.

They met the Pastor.

"Yes, the fair is mainly to buy books for the school. It's a pity that the schoolmistress is leaving to look after her ailing mother," sighed the Pastor.

"Perhaps I could teach the school for a while?" said Azathoth. "Would that help?"

"Could you? That would be marvellous," said the Pastor.

So, instead of moving on, as he was so used to doing, Azathoth became the schoolmaster. The Pastor had some reservations at first, because Azathoth would not attend the services at the chapel, but over time, her concerns evaporated. Azathoth was an excellent teacher, and good with the children. He listened quietly at the back whenever the Pastor taught religion to the kids. He didn't try to influence them one way or the other.

Nessa was a believer, and she asked Azathoth what he believed in.

"I don't know," he answered. "I've read the Holy Book, I've thought a lot about it, and it is a good guide to how to behave in your own life and in your relations with others. But something inside me won't let me believe in it completely. I've had some interesting discussions with the Pastor, and she understands my position. She's of the opinion that I will come to believe it, but I'm not so sure."

"I know that you are a deep thinker, Aza, my dear. I know that you are a good man. It would be nice if you did come to believe it, of course. But it doesn't matter."

"I'm going to have a baby, Aza, my dear," said Nessa one day.

"That's great news!" replied Azathoth. "Shall we get married? I love you, dear Nessa. Will you marry me?"

Nessa laughed and hugged him. "We'd better, I suppose."

The convention was that babies came after marriage, but it wasn't considered to be a hard and fast rule. Plenty of babies arrived before their parents had a chance to become man and wife, and in some cases the couple never got married for one reason or another.

So Azathoth and Vanessa got married and Nessa's Mum looked after baby Marigold while Nessa and Aza earned a living. Soon Mari was joined by a brother and later by a sister.

The years passed. The Pastor retired to be replaced by a new Pastor. She also tolerated Azathoth's non-religious nature, but she was more practical than the old Pastor and didn't enjoy the kind of deep discussions Azathoth had had with her predecessor.

The village had grown into small town, and a bus service now ran twice daily to a large town to the north. The tiny school had been extended twice and all three of Aza and Nessa's children had attended it, grown up, and gone on to University. Azathoth had to employ two more teachers.

Mari came home unexpectedly one day.

“Mum, Dad, I’m going to have a baby.”

Nessa was overjoyed. “So, when do we meet the father?”

Mari scowled. “He’s no longer around. The minute we found out, he left me and ran back to his Mum. Can I come back home?”

Aza experienced a burst of anger at the boy, which surprised him.

“Of course you can. Erm, this boy…”

“Please, Dad. Let it go. I’m better off without him.”

“OK, dear. OK. If you are sure.”

So Mari came home, and got a job in a nearby town. She left baby Keri with her grandparents during the day, and they loved it.

“Happy?” asked Aza as they sat on the sofa, with Keri asleep in her grandmother’s arms.

“Yes, of course. And you?” She was aware that Azathoth was sometimes restless.

“Yes, Nessa, my dear. Very happy. Isn’t she beautiful?”

Gradually their little family grew. Their other children married and had babies, Mari met a man who loved little Keri as much as she did and married him. She had two more babies. There were also cousins and nephews and nieces, uncles and aunts, and more distant relatives on Nessa’s side, but none on Aza’s side. He explained this by saying that he was an orphan and had been brought up in an orphanage. Only Nessa knew the truth, which was that he remembered nothing before happening on the village fair.

Keri was almost old enough to have babies of her own when her grandmother became ill. At first Nessa just felt unwell in the mornings, but soon she was vomiting all the time, and couldn’t keep any food down. She and Aza consulted the doctor, of course, and his face was grim when he gave them his diagnosis.

Nessa and Aza went home in a daze, and Aza held her on the sofa where she sobbed for a long, long time. Eventually she dropped off and he carried her up to their bed and laid her down gently. As he moved to go downstairs she drowsily said “Sorry, my love. I’ll be better in the morning.”

Aza set about spreading the news and their friends and relations all expressed their sorrow and promised to visit.

The next day the doctor’s medicines had kicked in and she was much better and Aza had to push down what he knew was doomed hope. Several of their friends and relations dropped in to see Nessa, and it turned into a bit of a party. But soon Nessa became tired. Aza was terrified that the strain would harm Nessa, but Mari stepped in and sent them off to their bedroom.

“Don’t worry. I’ll keep them at bay. You two go and have a rest.”

Aza helped her up the stairs and onto the bed.

“I love you, Nessa,” he whispered.

“I know. I love you too. Don’t be sad, my dear. We’ve had a good life. We’ve had marvellous kids and grand-kids. Haven’t we?”

“Yes, dear. Yes. I’m not sure that I can go on without you!”

“You can. You will. You have no choice, my love.”

Aza’s mind went back to when he had first seen Nessa. It could not go back any further because the memories were just not there. He looked at his wife and saw again the young girl with the toffee apples. He stroked her hair as she dropped off to sleep and he lay down beside her. He was as tired as she was and quickly dropped off to sleep himself.

Nessa’s close family were gathered around her bed, even Tony, her son, with a cast on his broken leg. She was dozing, the oxygen mask obscuring her face. Aza was holding her hand, but seemed confused and distressed. The rest of her family talked quietly about nothing very much.

Nessa roused slightly, mumbling into the mask. Aza removed it. “Nessa, my love!”

“Aza. Aza,” she said. She paused to lick her lips.

“My love?”

“I’ve always known... that you were special.”

He could barely hear her.

“What?”

“I hope you... enjoyed... our life... together. I’ve been privileged... to know you.”

He wiped the tears from his eyes. “Me too. Me too.”

“I’ll rest now. Maybe... I’ll see you again... sometime.”

“What?”

But her eyes had closed and she struggled to breath for a few seconds, then her breathing stopped. Aza stood up and pushed back his chair, his head in his hands. He walked out of the room and staggered into the garden, Mari appeared at his elbow.

“Dad! Dad?”

“Oh! Oh! Mari, I feel so alone! I feel that she’s left me, but I know that she didn’t. She didn’t!”

“Drink this, Dad. It’s a potion from the apothecary. It will help you sleep.”

“I don’t want to sleep!”

But he took the potion. In the morning he felt hollow. He talked to Nessa constantly. But over the days, the months, the years, it got a little easier.

From time to time he had mental flashes of strange realms. Gas people. Sea people. Underground people. People and realms too strange to describe. In all those flashes Nessa was there by his side.

“What does it all mean, Nessa?”

She just smiled at him.

He came to, lying by the side of the road. Someone had put a coat over him.

“What?” he said and tried to sit up.

Someone was talking on a radio somewhere. Something was beeping regularly.

“Please stay there for now, sir,” said an authoritative voice. “Relax, please.”

“What?” he said again.

“I’m a paramedic, sir. You collapsed by the side of the road and someone called the Emergency Service. Stay still, please.”

He was confused. Things happened around him, not really affecting him. The rattle of a stretcher from the ambulance, someone talking on a radio, someone taking his pulse, listening to his chest with a stethoscope. Then Nessa appeared.

“Nessa!”

She smiled at him. “Not long now, my love.”

Then she was gone. Eventually he was loaded into an ambulance and taken to hospital. He was bewildered and somewhat distressed state and had no real idea what was happening to him.

His daughter Marigold arrived.

“Mari! What’s happening? What happened? Why am I here?”

“Hush, Dad. You collapsed. They have to do some tests. You’ve had a heart attack they think.”

“I saw your Mum.”

Mari looked concerned. “But Dad...”

“Yes, I know. She’s been dead for years. But she’s always close to my thoughts. I sometimes see her for a second, in the corner of my eye. When someone walks like her.”

A tear squeezed from his eye. He didn’t mention what she had said. Later that night he had another heart attack and the doctors were unable to save him.

“I told you that it wouldn’t be long,” she laughed.

“Yes, my dear. It’s been so long. So long without you!”

“Without me? What about those times when you felt me at your shoulder? The moments before you went to sleep and you felt me beside you. When a stranger walked or talked or laughed like me.”

They were quiet, just being happy together again.

“You’ve made me immortal, Aza. By loving me. Well, I will go on as long as you will, anyway.”

“Are you real? Is this just a dying dream? Oh, my love!”

“Is this real?” She gestured at the glowing starscape, stars from dwarfs to super-giants. Clouds of brilliant gas, and small rocky planets and large gas giants, and life everywhere.

He nodded. "I have to return to my search."

"Yes, I know. But I will be..."

"... just a thought away. I know."

"I tried to stop searching once," said Azathoth. "In one of these material and magical places, in a place like this one, I settled down. I met a female, a mate. I fitted myself into the world. I loved and was loved back. We had children and we raised them. Did I get an inkling of what I was looking for? Maybe."

"What happened?" asked the Boffin. "Did you become restless? Did your quest cause you to leave them or something?"

"No. I was happy. I somehow forgot or repressed my urge to look for I know not what. I aged as they did. I forgot that I was not one of them. Well, actually, I think that I was one of them for a while. My children grew and moved away, married and had families of their own. My wife and I aged, as I said, and she died. I grieved for her, and again I got an inkling. Eventually, I became ill, which was a new experience for me though I didn't realize it at the time. I think that I died, and then, without a break, I was searching again."

He told them the story of his life with Nessa.

"What would happen if you did find what you are looking for? If you discovered what you are looking for and found it? What then?"

"Eh?" It was Azathoth's shortest utterance by a long way.

He looked at the Mage in bemusement. He thought for a moment.

"That's something I've never been asked! In all these years and what passes for years elsewhere, I've never been asked that, but now it seems like an obvious question! This terrible longing would be ended. I would no longer need to be a sailor on the tides of time and space. I'd be a searcher no longer. I could... What would I do? What would be my purpose? My purpose would be fulfilled, completed. I would have no reason to be. I could end. I could stop."

"In the terms of this space or Universe, you could die. This time for ever."

"I could, couldn't I? I could cease to exist. For ever. I could dissipate over the spaces. I could dissolve in space and time! Bliss! Sheer bliss!"

The Boffin and the Mage shook hands with Azathoth on their doorstep. He walked away down the road, and a woman walked up and linked arms with him. They didn't see where she had come from and then the pair turned the corner and were lost from sight.

"I feel sorry for him," said the Boffin. "I think that, at least in one way, he is destined to travel forever."

"And in another way?"

"He's the essence of seeking and not a real person and yet..."

"And yet... ?"

“Any yet, I felt like blessing him and that is not remotely a part of my paradigm.”

He hugged her. “My dear, it’s not to do with paradigms. It’s to do with human nature.”

She nodded and they went back into their cottage.
