



The Science of Love

By
Carol Anne Strange

I stand on the viewing deck of Aristotle Five, mesmerised by the fiery tendrils of Orion 6 Nebula in deepest space. I will never tire of this divine sight or, indeed, any of the great wonders of the universe but I've become travel weary and ready to return to the predictable landscape of my home world. Of course, that's my official excuse.

The rest of the ship's crew, all young flames I hasten to add, are oblivious to my true feelings. And thank heavens for that. I'm struggling to understand the turmoil within me let alone my colleagues. And then there is Isaac, Science Officer, and soon-to-be my successor. He is fuelled by the need for adventure, talking relentlessly about voyages to distant star systems, beyond the universes we've already discovered, in the perpetual hope of discovering intelligent life forms. His enthusiasm never wanes. I understand of course; I was once like that: excited, eager to discover, the great adventurer. Only now, despite everything I have seen, and still convinced that other life forms exist somewhere out there, I find another journey calling me.

"It's unlike you, John," Isaac said, when I first shared my intentions to leave the crew and settle back to life on Earth. "Are you suffering from space sickness?"

I couldn't bring myself to explain. I am absolutely fine physically and mentally but to appease Isaac, I endured a full medical scan. For a forty-something voyager, it revealed I'm in excellent shape for a man of my age. I certainly wasn't suffering from space sickness. But I already knew that.

Isaac seemed disappointed after my scan results, hoping perhaps there was a simple, logical explanation for my desire to leave but science provided no answers. It is perhaps as well that despite great technological advancements, the complexities of emotion still remain a mystery. Somehow, I don't think Isaac would understand what I'm feeling.

"We'll have you back on Earth in less than the hour," Isaac confirms, interrupting my reverie. "However," he adds, almost wishfully, "I can have the skipper turn her round if you've changed your mind?"

In some ways, that would be the easiest solution. Isaac and I have shared many voyages through time and space. Where many of the crew have come and gone, he has been a constant in my life. Leaving, for that reason alone, wouldn't be painless despite my decision but, being men of science, this is no place to let emotion enter the equation, no matter what I feel.

The familiar grey surface of Earth's moon comes into visual range. Aristotle Five reduces her speed and I become momentarily dizzy with the familiar lurching of body and mind as the vast spaceship settles into her new orbit. I wait and watch as Earth, suspended like a blue and emerald jewel against a sable backdrop, holds me spellbound. My heart beats its new rhythm for this homecoming. How many stars have passed me by since I was last here? How many moons, planets, suns, and nebulas? And here is my world, teeming with intelligent life, its energy vibrant with the complexity of human nature, and I am like a stranger hoping to find something - hoping to resolve what is missing in my life.

I gather my few possessions. I have always travelled lightly, never being one for materialism. I have, however, become attached to a heart-shaped multi-coloured crystal, which Isaac found on an expedition to the planet Halzion 4 in the seventh universe. Out of all the logged finds, this remains my favourite. It has a symbolic resonance and would be the only souvenir to return with me.

Isaac joins me for a final drink together. I take in this moment, savouring his presence, needing to commit him to memory. His square jaw makes for a determined profile. And his eyes ... well, his eyes have a wild and searching light about them, that become more animated as we recall voyages of times past, the wonders of each discovery still fresh in our thoughts. Our missions were often dangerous and uncharted but curiosity and the constant search for life transcended any negative thoughts, driving us onwards. We have been through so much together, sharing a common bond. Experience is etched on my face and in the burning blue of my eyes. I am still the scientist but can he see what is really yearning inside me?

The memories and vodka merge to create that sense of elevation, which does a good job of hiding my true emotions. Could it be possible, after working so closely with Isaac for so many years, that I'm mistaking these deep-rooted feelings for something else ... brotherly love perhaps? I'm confused and, for this reason, it is time to move on, bringing uncertainty for us both. As much as I crave terra-firma, I'm not sure how I will adapt to what would seem an alien environment after all these years. And, as for Isaac, taking on the role of Senior Science Officer will ask of him new responsibilities but I don't doubt him for a moment. I consider who will become Isaac's best mate and I hope the new junior will be compatible. Sentimentality perhaps but I want Isaac to be happy. Out here, in the vast darkness, it can be lonely and unforgiving without ... well, without friendship.

"It's been a great honour to serve with you, John." Isaac's glass clinks against mine. "It's going to be tough taking your place."

His voice is full of sincerity. If only my own thoughts spoke the truth. How I wish to tell him how I really feel. Instead, I fight against the pounding in my heart and maintain the decorum befitting of my rank and professional status.

"I have every faith in you, Isaac. Besides, how can you fail when I've taught you everything I know?"

I nudge Isaac, and smile, attempting to lighten the atmosphere but realise that beneath his cool exterior and that determined jaw, anxiety has taken hold. For a moment, I see a lost boy in the eyes of the man before me, a vulnerability that crushes me. I must be strong for the both of us.

"Isaac, my friend, we're both embarking on a completely new voyage. Life is full of uncertainties, but hasn't that always been the case?"

Isaac nods thoughtfully, knocking his drink back. There is silence for a moment. A silence synonymous with space – empty yet brimming with energy - and, for me, something more, something I dare not speak of. Then he grins, and I see a plan formulate on his face.

"Remember the Asrel Spiral?"

Instantly, my memory takes me back to three years ago when we discovered a new galaxy by the spiral nebula in deep space. "How can I forget? It's the most beautiful I've ever seen."

"I'd like to return." His eyes glow with the promise of adventure. "I just have a hunch there's something more out there."

Isaac is contemplating his next mission. Good. It will focus him when I am gone and that makes me happy.

"Then you should follow it!" I say. "One of these galaxies has intelligent life. I'm sure of it. What's more, I'm sure you'll be the one to make the discovery."

It is a bold statement but I know Isaac has as much opportunity as anyone. And, anyway, I believe in him, completely.

"And what about you, John? ... What are your plans? ... What do you want?"

"I don't rightly know, Isaac", I lie, avoiding his eyes as I do so, " but I guess my first challenge will be learning to feel at home again on Earth."

Even now, he is still searching for the answer, trying to work out my reasons for leaving as if there is some equation, a scientific formula to provide an explanation. I remain elusive. I have to.

You see this quest for finding life beyond our own planet seems distant to me now. I have been so obsessed with this mission that the real purpose of life - to love – is passing me by. The concept of love is as strange and alien to me as the wonders of charting new territories in space and, to be truthful, it scares me too. Before I became a voyager on Aristotle Five - many Earth years ago - I experienced the stirrings of love while studying at university. My insatiable craving, however, for knowledge and discovery, and my ambitions to become a voyager, closed my heart. I denied myself the opportunity to fall in love. I believed there was no room for it in science.

But what is love? I find it difficult to quantify and, being a scientist, I have attempted to dissect love, unravel its mystery and try to understand its mechanics but it eluded me. Well of course it did. Love is more mystifying than searching for any intelligent life out here in the obsidian darkness of space. Love goes beyond sub-atomic particles. It exists but can't be explained. It is the ultimate science because of itself. It moves mere mortals to the edge of their emotions. And now, it is moving me, to return to Earth because I can bare it no more. No longer am I driven to find new life; it is love that I need. It is unrequited love that I'm running away from. If I am honest, I have known this for some time, choosing denial because it is less confrontational, but I just can't deny the truth of my feelings any longer – at least not to myself. To love and be loved: what is more?

Isaac though ... I just can't tell him ... he doesn't feel the same ... I'd have known by now.

It is the quest for love that excites my senses and sends my blood rushing through my veins, more so than our search for extra-terrestrials or discovering a new planet or star system. I am frightened he will feel less of me for knowing this. I'm scared of his rejection. Besides, he's too young; his desire is sparked by the need for adventure, not love. Perhaps in another decade, he may find himself yearning for more. Right now, love is too strong and complex a word to bring into the equation. For Isaac, it would be just too unscientific. For me, staying will only break my heart.

Aristotle Five crawls to a stop. Metal groans eerily, followed by a thick thud as we dock with the satellite station. Time to go.

Isaac holds out his hand and I take it and we embrace awkwardly as men of science do, trying to approach this last moment without attachment or emotion. Sad that, how coldly our profession conditions us. Then I turn and walk away to the awaiting shuttle. It takes all my strength not to look back. He doesn't see the tears filling my eyes, the emotion that would give me a way, revealing the secrets of my heart. I doubt I will see him again and this is the last thought I have as I leave what has been my home for too many years.

The shuttle enters Earth's atmosphere, buffering against the heat, and I feel momentarily uncertain, as if on the cusp of rebirth, and then we are out of the darkness into the brilliant light. My spirits soar. The sun is just rising in Nevada, like a soul awakening, and, as I make my descent, I am filled with a new sense of purpose - to love and be loved. Only this time, I'm going to ignore the science and listen to my heart.

About the Writer

Carol Anne Strange started writing professionally in 1985, predominantly focusing on freelance writing, mentoring, and publishing. She is also the author of several non-fiction books and ghost written courses. In 2000, she embarked on a range of creative projects encompassing film, poetry, prose, and fiction. Several years of experimentation followed.

In 2005, her first book of prose and poetry *In Touch with the Essence* won the David St John Thomas Charitable Trust awards. After successfully experimenting with short fiction, Carol began an MA Professional Writing with University College Falmouth to focus on writing fiction. She is currently working on her debut novel, *The Mobile Librarian*. This will be the first of a slate of novels, focusing on modern fiction with a fantasy twist.

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