

Nine

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A short story based on the space trading game Oolite.

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Thanks to:

My mum and dad, who splashed out a considerable amount of cash on a 48k ZX Spectrum in 1983, and then followed it up with what must have seemed like an outrageously expensive computer game for my birthday in 1984. Value for money though - 'Elite' was probably the most influential birthday present I've ever had...

All on the Oolite bulletin board who refused to let me off lightly with a mere two Novellas and a short story. Damn you all! :)

Author's Note

This is a bit of 'proper' Oolite Sci-Fi. There's a bit of plagiarism here, though I'm not actually sure from which stories I've pinched some of these ideas. I suspect some past master of Sci-Fi I read in my youth will be turning in his grave, but there's not much I can do about that. Doubtless someone will be able to tell me.

I recycled the characters of Raan and Sassia from my teenage ramblings - it seemed only fair to dust them off after so many years.

I wrote this story in about four hours, to see if I could come up with something compelling in a short space of time. Let me know what you think!

Nine

The great debating hall of the Rexebe Institute of Technology was the locus of galactic scientific achievement. Here, the foremost minds of science defined and mapped the boundaries of knowledge, pushed back the edges of the unknown and defied any mystery to elude their investigations. Here it was that fusion power had its origin, witchspace had been first postulated and Quirium had been tamed. The list of achievements was matched only by the pride that the Fellows of the Institute took in their combined achievements.

Today the hall fairly crackled with emotion. A man was postulating at the centre of the floor, his voice echoing back in sympathy from the perfectly tuned acoustic, yet delicately vaulted, architecture, and reverberating as he slammed his hand down on the famous Leesti-pine raised dais to counterpoint the end of his speech.

‘I say it can be done!’ the speaker exclaimed, fixing his audience with a fierce and baleful eye, ‘I say it will be done!’

A ripple of mutterings and the subversive sounds of discord ran through the audience. Sunlight choose that moment to shine brightly through the enormous plexiglass dome that formed the roof, focusing attention back onto the speaker.

‘Is it not clear from our calculations?’ the speaker continued, his wild grey hair falling across his eyes, ‘The basic theories of witchspace? Travel through a fourth spacial dimension demands a progression!’

‘Rubbish!’ a voice called from the left.

‘Long we have debated this, long we have heard that it’s not possible. Gentlemen! I have mathematical proof of its very existence!’

‘Charlatan!’ this time the heckle came from the right.

‘Our world-side ancestors marked the edges of their maps with the words ‘Here Be Dragons!’ They thought they might sail off the edge of the world! We used to believe our planets were the centre of the universe...’

Laughter greeted this remark and a wag called out, ‘Some still think they are the

centre of the universe...!’

The speaker continued, ‘Our forefathers took a century to determine the true nature of dark matter and I just ye not - we continue to make the same mistakes today!’

Boos followed this and a few of the assembled worthies decided they had had enough and began to leave.

‘We think we have the answers, we think we know everything, but I assure you we do not! We know witchspace travel time follows the square of the distance, we know we drive through four dimensional space. Witchspace drives have operated on this principle for decades! But there are anomalies, gentlemen! Anomalies!’

A further mumble of dissent gathered volume. The speaker pulled himself up straight and glared them back into silence.

‘Stellar cartography from the eight charts shows plotting errors which can only be reconciled using modified gravitation theories and untenable galactic constants! Inconsistent spiral tracer measurements, conflicting pulsar directional indicators!’

‘Which can be dealt with...’ mumbled a crusty old dissenter on the front row, who happened to be one of those who had provided the galactic constant theory of witchspace, ‘We can explain it with closed witchspace curves! There’s no need for anything else.’

The speaker ploughed on regardless.

‘The Galactic Navy constantly informs us that the Thargoids occasionally evade them, leaving behind a witchspace wormhole that has no effect on our ships. We have no idea where they hide between attacks! We lose more traders to witchspace drive malfunctions than can be statistically accounted for. The power consumption for witchspace drives is always, I repeat always, three point one four two percent more than our theoretical calculations allow! A number some of you may recognise! We call it ‘witchspace drag’, let us be honest Gentlemen - here be dragons!’

That was a cheap shot. Many of the assembled were mathematicians with

multiple honours. They took a dim view of such high-handed treatment.

‘How can we account for these things? The explanation is simple, gentlemen! Our understand of witchspace is flawed, we have an oversight, an irregularity! Let me spell it out! We have made a mistake!’

The hall erupted, many were on their feet, waving slips of paper and demanding to be heard.

‘Where’s your data?’

‘Irrelevant, totally irrelevant!’

‘Get him out of here!’

‘How dare he!’

‘The very thought!’

Courtiers in attendance brought the situation under control after a minute or so and the room settled down.

‘He’s halfway to Raxxla!’ someone shouted from the rear.

Tumultuous applause greeted this funny. For a speaker to be associated with Raxxla - social death! As if anyone took that idea seriously!

The speaker raised his voice a final time, ‘The explanation is before you gentlemen! I put to you the following hypothesis. We have failed to model witchspace correctly. We have been limited by our perceptions. Witchspace is not a flat structure as we suppose, it too has its own topology!’

Many eminent members were on their feet again, angrily gesturing.

‘Refuted by Braben, 2822!’

‘Proved false by Sinclair in 2844!’

‘Denied by Giles in 2893!’

‘Dismissed by Aegidian in 2994!’

The speaker held up a hand and spoke softly, 'I am well aware of the contributions of our past masters. I offer you this test of my theory, a prediction if you will...'

The hall fell silent. Here was the pride of the speaker finally showing itself. Here was the moment he might be held accountable to. Here might mark the beginning of his downfall. Collectively the assembled ranks leaned forward so as to better hear.

The crusty old dissenter shook his head sadly. 'Fool, you damned fool...'

The speaker enjoyed his moment. He looked methodically around the hall, fixing his gaze upon eyes both hostile and curious. He slowly swept the room, making sure he had the attention of every single member of the Institute.

'My prediction is simple,' he snapped, once he was satisfied. 'With the correct topology mapped into a suitably modified witchspace drive, I shall be able to travel to a further location in the galaxy, a new galactic destination. Gentlemen, if I may!'

He turned, waving a hand at a coding device on the dais in front of him. A huge holo-screen illuminated behind him with a complex graphical representation of the galaxy. The familiar view of the local systems appeared; Lave, Leesti, Tionisla all the way across to Tianve bounded in a rectangle, a tiny section of the galaxy's spiral arm.

'Chart One!'

This was nothing new. The audience held their breath.

A second rectangle appeared a little way away from the first, separate and in the same plane as the first. Further rectangles appeared in sequence.

'The eight charts, long supposed to lie in the same spiral arm of the galaxy, separated by thousands of light years. But...'

The speaker waved his hand and the rectangles moved, distorted and flowed towards each other.

'My theory states our familiar charts are not so divergent as we currently

believe. They interlock in a three dimensional structure, as indicated! These positions allow us to rationalise all the contrary indicators I mentioned previously and provide the following prediction...'

The hush continued. Many were staring at the topological map on the screen with bafflement and confusion. The charts had come together into a three dimension shape, a nine sided roughly spherical arrangement. One side was empty.

'...Gentlemen! I give you the ninth chart!'

'You shouldn't have insulted the mathematicians with that cheap joke about *pi*.' his daughter reprimanded him, 'You might have convinced some of them.'

'Fools the lot of them.'

Raan Nenino was Professor of the Rexebe University for Astrometric Studies. He idly ran his hand through his thick and untidy grey hair before fixing her with his trademark glare, so vividly recalled by all of his former students.

Unlike those students she returned the glare without flinching.

'Father you can't keep railing against them, you've already been overlooked for the chairmanship of the university, you'll never get a fellowship if you carry on like this!'

'I care little to be a fellow of an organisation that can't follow the scientific method!'

'You don't really mean that.' Sassia looked alarmed, 'What else are you going to do after your semesters are up?'

'I'll find some research grant...'

'No you won't!' she replied, 'Father, you keep turning down all the decent jobs and offers you get! They won't keep rolling in!'

'What offers?'

Sassia rolled her eyes in frustration. 'You had that direct invite from Jim

McKenna from Onrira. He was interested in your work. He had some advanced theories about witchspace...'

'Jim McKenna? He was only interested in how it might be turned into a weapon!'

'That's not fair!' Sassis refuted his opinion. 'He was cleared of association with that Q-Bomb business. He was completely exonerated! You're just making excuses.'

'No smoke without fire, my dear.' Raan replied, 'Besides, I intensely disliked that woman he brought with him. Arrogant and cocksure she was.'

Sassia tried a different tack, 'Nevertheless, you've had plenty of opportunities to apply yourself to...'

Raan snapped around to look at her, 'What? Worthwhile research? Is that what you were going to say? You don't believe in the ninth chart either, do you?'

'It's not that...'

'It's exactly that!'

'Father, it's just that you spend all your time on it. It's an obsession, people are beginning to talk! It makes life very difficult...'

Raan sighed deeply, 'My dear, I understand. I really do. But the truth matters. What have I taught you from your earliest years?'

'Science is about discovering the truth, not pandering to our own vanities - I know father! But we have to be practical too! Stop fighting Fitzroy and the others. If you're not careful this is going to destroy your career! Is it worth losing that over this theory of yours?'

'The evidence demands a verdict. The theory is sound, Sassia! What's more I think I can prove it! Wait until I return from the ninth chart with evidence! I will be the first to see the other side and come back!'

The door chime sounded, indicating that they had a visitor. Sassia went to the front room and brought in a man. Raan recognised him at once. It was Fitzroy,

he of the galactic constant theory of witchspace.

Fitzroy was old, slightly bent, but carried an air of authority. Today it seemed doubly so. Sassia actually respected him enormously. He had helped her with assignments and placements in the past. Sassia escorted him into the Nenino's study.

'What can I do you for you, Fitzroy?' Raan said coolly, not looking up from his notes, 'A strange hour for a visit.'

'*Timeo danaos et dona ferentes*, 'Fitzroy began, by way of introduction. 'Though I can't claim to be a Greek of course.'

'And what gift do you bring?' Raan snapped back impatiently.

'News. Your execrable conduct in the hall this afternoon raised rather a lot of eyebrows, my dear friend. I'm afraid I was unable to assuage the effects of it all on our current chairman. He has come to an unfortunate conclusion.'

Sassia looked pale. 'What are you talking about?'

'Only that your father's precipitate actions have determined that various confidential meetings have occurred, resulting in the gestation of various documents whose provenance is now established and whose effects are to create an immediate vacancy within the department of Astrometric Studies.'

'What?' Sassia queried, unable to follow Fitzroy's obtuse language.

'Your father has been fired, effective immediately. ' Fitzroy said grimly, 'For bringing the university into disrepute.'

'This is all your doing, Fitzroy!' Raan snapped, stalking forwards angrily.

'Father, that's not fair!' Sassia said, 'Stop attacking your colleagues, he's only trying to help!'

Raan paused, breathing heavily to calm himself, 'I apologise, Fitzroy. I'm somewhat overwrought. Forgive my bad manners.'

'Your daughter is right though, Raan.' Fitzroy said directly, 'This obsession with

the ninth chart, it's - well, unseemly! You need a break, why not take a vacation? We can find a role for you upon your return, leave it with me. I'll figure something out.'

'Gardening leave? And sweep my work under the carpet so you can further promulgate your theory!'

'Father! Stop it!' Sassia snapped, angrily, 'Listen to him!'

'Merely let it rest for a while.' Fitzroy replied, trying to mollify him, 'Gather evidence, refine the theory. Rome wasn't built in...

'Rome might not have been built in a day,' Raan fumed, 'But it was built! Remember that! I intend to go there - and return!'

Fitzroy sighed. 'And if you're wrong, if there is no ninth chart, nothing on the other side of these errant wormholes? If my theory of closed curves is right? What if the technology fails and you suffer a mis-jump? Or land up in a Thargoid war zone? What then?'

Raan favoured Fitzroy with a fierce glare.

'Then you can live in peace and toast my efforts in proving you right, Fitzroy! Your wretched constant theory will be all we have left!'

It was too late to turn back now. He'd sold his house, all his possessions and traded his family fortune to finance the research, the equipment, the hire of a long range freighter and escorts for this field trip. It had become a hugely expensive undertaking. If this didn't provide the answer he desired, he would be effectively destitute.

Now here he was, in chart eight, ready to jump.

There had been a number of discoveries en-route, which had helped with support and assistance from a few quarters. The construction of a stable static wormhole between localised points had been one. It had been hugely satisfying to see a small ship move across a few kilometres of space in the blink of an eye between two artificially sustained wormhole entrances, and even more compelling to see the ship sit stationary in the double gate, half of it facing in one direction, and the other half of it ten kilometres away facing the other way - yet still whole and

undamaged!

Another highpoint was storing not only enough energy for a single galactic hyperspace jump, but two. He had to have a means of returning after all!

Raan held a letter in his hand, and idly glanced at it. It was a letter from his daughter, handwritten, on parchment.

Sassia refused to be a party to his quest. They had undergone blazing rows and finally stopped talking. Her last communication had been brief.

Father, If you insist on doing this damn silly thing, please don't do it in this damn silly way. It's not too late. Come back home. I love you. S x.

He crumpled the letter and threw it aside. It was the only other object on board the paired down freighter. He was alone.

Through the vision port he could see the four Wolf Mk2 escorts awaiting their signal. He thumbed the narrow-band comms.

‘Gentlemen, all systems show green. I am ready to make the jump. Proceed directly via galactic hyperspace to Rexebe following the collapse of my exit wormhole. If all goes well, I will see you there once I have jumped back from the ninth chart!’ Raan glared at the ships as they lazily turned around. ‘Move it! Faster! Get away now!’

Simple words of acknowledgement followed from the escorts, and they peeled away from the freighter to give him a clear zone to jump from. Truth be told the pilots were more than glad to put some distance between themselves and the erratic professor.

Raan checked the power monitors, witchspace drift correctors and drive units for a final time. Everything looked as he expected. The jump should take him to the calculated co-ordinates of the ninth chart with enough charge to conduct a second jump back to chart one.

He flicked the wide-band comms open and started the countdown, he'd deliberately programmed the computer to start from a different position.

‘Commencing witchspace countdown. Nine.... eight.... seven....’ the on-board

computer began to chant.

He sat in the pilot's chair awaiting the disorientation of the witchspace jump, familiar now after the long hard trudge across the charts... almost there...

This is is, the culmination of my life's work. To see the ninth chart, to prove to all and sundry that there is somewhere beyond the eighth chart, to arrive there and return with photographic evidence! To see the other side of the ninth wormhole! Soon, oh so soon! Nine!

'Three... two.... one. Witchspace drive engaged.'

The stars faded away as the reassuring witchspace tunnel appeared. The iridescent coloured rings of non-light surged past the ship. Raan breathed a sigh of relief.

It worked! It worked!!! Ha! No witchspace drive malfunction as I was warned, no interstellar space drop-out or Thargoid invasion fleet, no anomalies, finally! No anomalies...

He paused. Surely the witchspace transfer should have completed by now? He checked the time indicator. Ten seconds, fifteen, twenty. Still the rings sped past.

He checked the drive units. The wormhole had been created exactly as planned. It was as predicted.

A half remembered thought came back to him, a snatch of conversation. Fitzroy!

'And if you're wrong, if there is no ninth chart, nothing on the other side of these errant wormholes? If my theory of closed curves is right?'

Closed curves! The rings continued; nine, eighteen, twenty seven, thirty six...

It can't be! My theory was perfect! Dimensions in harmony, the cube of the first three numbers! One, three, nine! Perfect! NINE!

More rings; forty five, fifty four, sixty three, seventy two, eighty one.

An eternity of damnable rings!

Raan perceived the nature of his predicament with absolutely clarity and heart-shocking despair. He broke down, thrashing around the bridge in fury, smashing consoles and instrumentation as he finally surrendered to the madness that had driven him here.

‘Nine! Nine! NINE!’ he raged, foaming at the mouth.

The rings continued to float past, as they would for eternity.

For the ninth wormhole had no other side.