

PROXIMA JUNK

Welcome to the curiosity shop.

BY MARK VANDERSLUIS

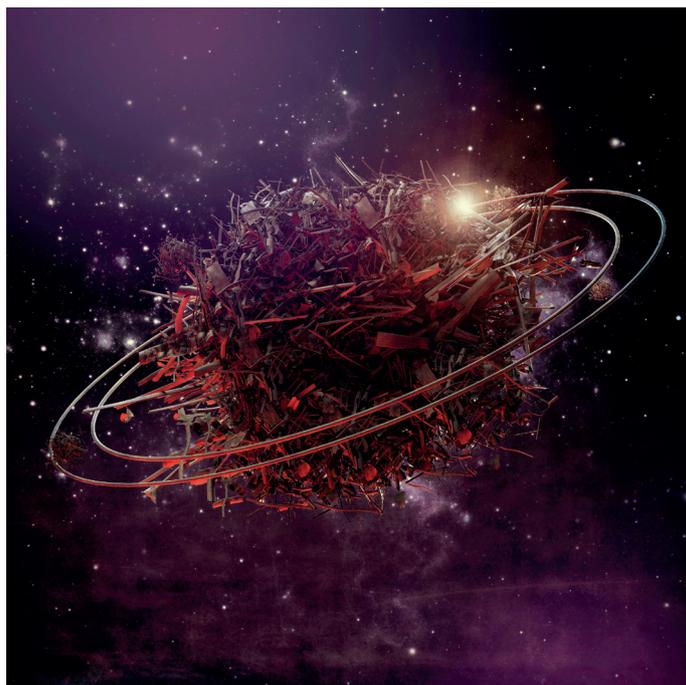
W elcome to our upcycling facility! Do you want any help or are you just browsing? Just browsing? Well, if you need any help or advice from me just press your proboscis against the red button. No colour vision? Oh, well, the red button is the triangular one to your right... er, $\pi/2$ radians clockwise... oh, that means roughly $\pi/2$ radians rotationally around your vertical axis starting from a vector drawn between our bodies. No, not that way, there's nothing in that rotational direction. The other way. We call it clockwise according to local convention. No, I have no idea what 'clock' means or why it is wise. Anyway, just press the re... er, the triangular button to summon me.

Just before I leave you to your browsing, can I point out that unfortunately we have very few spacecraft in this part of the Galaxy, it's all fairly primitive round here, nothing suitable for rigging up for transport or rocket racing, if that's what you're after. We've salvaged a couple of autonomous craft, if you're interested. One of them comes with a disc-shaped item partly made with gold, and a few hieroglyphics on a metal plate. That would make a good talking point in your abode when you have friends round. Also, I tried an identical one from the last craft we found, and they're quite tasty!

Other than that, we have lots of irradiated relics from a planet in a local G2 star system. We call it PPC, Proxima Proxima Centauri, because it's the closest star to our group. Their main industry seems to have been the production of irradiated items, so we can do you a good deal on those — you should see the amount we have in storage! Mostly irradiated metal objects, but also plenty of other curiosities all covered in irradiated dust. They seem to have built many sites all around their world dedicated to production, almost all of them under water for some reason. They also had thousands of mobile units based on primitive spacecraft technology, which they could use to speedily irradiate

any location on their planet. From what we have seen, they had some spectacular

successes using these to cover large areas of their world. Some of the most amazing craters produced by non-natural means I have ever seen along this spiral arm of the Galaxy! No, I have no idea why they behaved in this way. Maybe it was their method of sustenance, maybe it was a cultural thing — a



form of performance art possibly? Actually, given the amount of irradiated stuff they had everywhere, I reckon it was some sort of religion. They must have worshipped it. And the production sites always displayed the same symbol based on a circle with segments coloured black and yellow, er, I mean with specific frequency annotations.

We do have a few remaining mobile units in pristine condition, if you're interested? Well, when I say pristine condition, we have removed the irradiation mechanisms, I can guarantee. You may have seen newsfeeds about that fire we had in our old premises when one was accidentally detonated — yes, that was us — the old place was completely vaporized. But as you can see, we've rebuilt and we're as good as new.

We also run guided tours to the planet every once in a while, if you fancy it? Looking at your body form, I think you'd need to be suited up, as the temperature is quite high — typically 320 K. Lifeforms? Well not intelligent ones, no. There are some bipedals, no real language to speak of. We don't know

where the intelligent ones went. I suspect they didn't go anywhere, based on the few spacecraft we've seen. So primitive! There were a couple of dozen devices that had been landed on the planet's satellite and even fewer on the next planets out, but no signs of colonies, no desire to expand their habitat at all. So I think they just petered out, with a whimper rather than a bang! But who knows?

Sorry, no, they don't come with guarantees — it's all second-hand stuff here, created by unknown, fairly primitive alien technologies, it's not as though you can get your credits back from them! Yes, it's as seen. No, we don't have any user manuals.

OK, maybe next time then. Before you go, can I just add you to our mailing list? We offer some excellent discounts and special offers as well as our own loyalty card — look, we put that religious symbol I mentioned on it. I'll just need a few details on your specific interests...

Nice to see you — have a safe journey to... where did you say you were from? Ah yes, well have a safe journey back there. You could take a short detour to our head office at Gliese — it has a huge stock from all around the Galaxy:

hundreds of different spacecraft types, exotic lifeforms, artefacts, energy sources, alien art, limited-edition collectables, you name it!

Hope to see you again soon. Mind that sharp protruding bit near the airlock! Oh! Sorry!

Sorry about that. You're OK now? All patched up? Yes, we must get that fixed, we just can't get the sentient staff locally!

Bye!

Oh well, another bloody timewaster — "just browsing", "does that come with a guarantee?" — I ask you! Anyway, nearly break time — I'll get the oven on to heat up some metal, that'll make nice snack to dunk in the slime. How much longer am I stuck here in this dump? Just under one more revolution round Proxima Centauri and then I can ask for a transfer a bit closer to the family. I can't wait! ■

Mark Vandersluis works as an IT manager for a telecoms company in England. With a lifelong interest in all things science and technology, this is his first SF story.

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