
Fool's Gold

By Ganesh Nair

One hour prior, a drab brown monolith sparked into existence amidst the fringes of the Tigin system. A remote scan of its comm history, quick and cursory enough not to attract attention, revealed its call sign and purpose. The *G.P.M. Ecliptic*, a standard *Mass Cracker*-class Protectorate mining freighter, sailed quietly toward the distant glow of the local star.

Sitting safely atop a plateau jutting up from a harsh, barren lunar surface, Rand Jus was wracked by a storm of coughs. The worn creases on his human face contorted into visible throbs of pains.

“Hnnuhr.” He sighed painfully, doing his best to ignore the crimson flecks on his breath mask.

Looking back, running dark with no life support was not the best stratagem. Not with the Disease starting to take its toll. The fire in his lungs subsided, and Rand pressed the few remaining colored lights that illuminated his otherwise dim cockpit, and awaited the results. Hopefully, the freighter hadn't reached the bounds of his range.

Rand waited for the second data scan to resolve itself, preferably without alerting anyone. He kicked his legs up onto the lifeless dashboard, and after a few minutes of absent-minded thought, began to dwell on his purpose here: a long shot of a gamble. Truth be told, Rand wasn't entirely sure exactly what he was doing. These mining ships usually only carried fuel-grade ore, mostly raw. Valuable, yes, but a cache of raw ore

would not sell for the exorbitant prices he needed. However, he had gotten a tip that the *Ecliptic* was carrying something beyond what was listed on its cargo manifest. Of the precious few aliens who frequented the infected human refugee camps on the outer arms of the galaxy, one had something useful to impart, albeit for a few credits - an intercepted transmission from the *Ecliptic* to the Protectorate Hub World of Tigin. Amidst all the static, the word "relic" came out clear as day. It was a godsend. He had been looking for a good score for a while now. Not for anything selfish. Not at all. Just so he could see his race survive.

He was here on more than a hunch, but what still could be considered a leap of faith, mostly in regard to whether or not his alien 'friend' faked the transmission. Hostility towards humans had been on the rise since the before of the war, and kept a steady pace even after the human surrender, as the halls of the Galactic Protectorate continued to feed the flames of hate. There was always the chance of an off-world grafter wanting to take advantage of man's desperation, even for a few bucks.

But Rand had no time to dwell on that at the moment. His only war now was with the Disease. It was unfortunate no one had come up with a more descriptive name for the plague that had decimated humanity, but it was time for man to focus on his mortality, rather than creativity. The Disease originated on Cios, a few years after the war, once the Protectorate assumed its power. Quickly, it spread among the human populations throughout the galaxy, wiping most out within a generation. The few that remained, still infected, quarantined themselves in desolate camps in the galactic periphery. They suspected the Protectorate's alien hand guiding this xenophobic genocide, but none had the evidence, or the resolve to prove it.

The few species who still deigned to interact with humans, rather than spit at their mention, had promised aid in the search for a cure. Of course, even science had its price. Rand's only remaining source of income was his ship and his wits, so he resorted to thievery to fund the research of a few struggling, yet ever hopeful, medologists. But, after managing to stave off the Disease for the better part of two decades, even Rand was beginning to succumb. His species' desperation had now become his own.

A ghostly blue light sparked in the darkness. The second spike had run its course unnoticed.

Thank God.

A translucent heads-up display blinked onto his view screen. Rand used his calloused hands to scroll through the data with quick bursts of mid-air gestures, finally locating the *Ecliptic's* point of departure.

"Huh. Odd," he said to no one in particular.

It was a small, unknown system past the extremes of Protectorate jurisdiction.

"Four planets, all gas giants, orbiting a small red giant. Nothing particularly habitable." He tipped the brim of his hat up with his thumb and managed a smirk, "What'd they find there?"

He grunted as he reached forth to flip switches un-flipped and press buttons un-pressed, allowing his ship to emerge from its slumber. With a short creak and a long groan, the *Pyrite* growled to life.

After a minute, Rand removed his oxygen mask and basked in the gaseous warmth of artificial life support.

“Good morning, sir.” A tinny, yet musical voice floated through the new air, “I suppose you’ve found what it is you’re looking for?”

“Yeah, Trill. Although I’m still not sure exactly *what* it is I’m looking for. I hope it’s as valuable as they made it sound.”

“Are you sure it is safe to power on all systems?”

“We should be out of their sensor range by now. Even if not, we’d be too faint for them to notice,” Rand fiddled with the controls before him, dampening the ship’s low rumble, “We’re going to have to go dark again when we make our approach.”

“Does that include shutting me down, again?”

“Of course not, Trill.” Rand grabbed the yoke with one hand, and leaned back to knock a loose coupling module into place, “You’re the only friend I’ve got.”

Outside, ice and dust swirled up and around the *Pyrite*’s thick, but practically ancient, military-grade hide. The soft red glow of ion efflux belied the raging storm of the engines, which thawed the local regolith. With a thunderous boost, the tiny rust bucket was kicked up through the moon’s thin atmosphere and into the speckled brilliance of low orbit.

“Trill, on my mark, adjust for a round orbit slingshot maneuver, and gun the engines. We should be able to hit ‘em quick, even if we have to go dark midway.” Rand cleared his throat of a familiar taste.

“Flight path calculated, sir. Interception course plotted.”

“Great,” He braced for the impulse, “Punch it.”

* * *

Gastril Snivvens scuttled around the bridge of his ship. His elongated egg of a

head wobbled comically about an otherwise gaunt frame. The air of the *Ecliptic* had a characteristic dingy musk that both stung and soothed his inset nostrils. There was no dichotomy of smell and surroundings; the *Ecliptic* was as dank and squalid as one would expect a mining ship to be. Snivvens' years of service for the Protectorate, as well as his affinity towards the seedier aspects of civilization, allowed him to acclimate quickly to the fetid conditions of asteroid cracking, but had not prepared him for what his team had stumbled upon at the edges of the galaxy.

“ETA, Officer?” His two powerful forelegs propelled him to the Officer's side, startling him. Snivvens liked to keep them on their toes.

“Approximately two hours until landfall.” The Second Officer's six black eyes blinked, individually. “Our escort is en route and should reach us within the next hour.”

“Excellent. Carry on.” Snivvens flashed a smile of pointed teeth.

His weaker hind legs allowed him to scuttle surreptitiously away, patiently awaiting whatever reward was his to claim.

* * *

The *Pyrite* hurtled headlong through the void of space, its course kept steady not by engines, but only occasional bursts of gaseous propellant.

“How long before we intercept?” Rand had his oxygen mask on again, but had wiped away the blood.

“Estimated 15 minutes, sir. The *Ecliptic* should attempt landfall two hours from then.”

“Great! Plenty of time!” A dour smile failed to hide his sarcasm.

“I would hope so, sir. Being onboard that ship when it touches Protectorate soil would not be a wise career move. Much less so on the Hub World.”

“Point noted, Trill.” Rand let a comforting, dark cloud roll over the shell-shocked memories Trill had just stirred. Ancient days as part of the human armada faded back into the past where they belonged. The incurable plague, though, still roiled within him, refusing to be silenced. Shortly, he blinked back into the moment.

The *Pyrite* continued to barrel forward, inanimately unaware.

* * *

Fifteen minutes later, the bright blue star of the *Ecliptic*'s ion trail had consumed the *Pyrite*'s viewscreen. The rad counter began to emit a series of soft clucks, which gradually took on the characteristics of a dull roar.

“Trill, boost us out of the fires. I don't want to get cooked before I get there.”

“Certainly, sir. I'm sure their firearms are waiting to do the honors. It would be extremely disrespectful of you.”

“You're all heart, Trill.” Rand was uncertain at what point during their twenty-some-odd-year partnership Trill had obtained his snark, but he wouldn't have it any other way, “And while you're at it, boost us forward. Let's umbilical with the hull before they realize we're a little more than just a radar fluctuation.”

The old ship, christened *Pyrite* during its days as a troop transport, and modified beyond reason in the post-war years, groaned as it lurched out, parallel to the *Ecliptic*'s flight vector. Dwarfed by the immense barge, the *Pyrite* tumbled forward and sidled comfortably up to the hull, hovering alongside what Rand hoped to be a less-traveled part of the mammoth ship. A conveniently placed maintenance port greeted them.

“Nice job.” Rand had already slipped into an airtight suit of orange, canvas-like material. He screwed on his glass bulb of a helmet over his breathing mask, “Now just extend the-”

His command was met by a loud clank and a vicious shudder that nearly bowled him over. He steadied himself on a hard bolted hand rail, “-umbilical.”

“Five steps ahead of you, sir.” If AIs could smirk...

“Perfect.” Rand’s voice was a garbled mess infected by radio static, contrary to his partner’s sing-song expressions. His fifty-year-old muscles strained against the *Pyrite*’s port-way which eventually yielded without the familiar hiss of decompression. He floated gently down the translucent corridor illuminated only by faint starlight and the brilliant spectra of local gas giants gliding lazily past. With arms outstretched and knees bent back, Rand made contact with the hull, careful to minimize vibrations. An opened panel and a few turns of a sonic spanner rewarded him with the silent opening of the maintenance hatch and the familiar face of a dark, seemingly endless shaft.

“Wish me luck.”

“Come back alive, sir.” Trill’s voice was remarkably clear.

Rand severed his link and grasped the sides of the *Ecliptic*’s hull.

“All heart,” He mumbled and, with a shrug and a shove, flung himself down the shaft.

Within a few meters, he felt the creeping tendrils of a gravitic generator begin to take hold. Far above, the hatch closed shut with a faint bang that only an atmosphere could carry. The walls of the chute shuddered, and he felt the departure of the *Pyrite*. Rand was on his own, now.

* * *

For a member of a race bred purely for manual labor, Carac possessed a remarkably firm grasp of oral communication.

“Did you hear that?” The words, far from Galactic Standard, rolled out of his gullet and around his string-like oral appendages.

His companion, of similar build, cocked his bulbous head in ignorance.

Again, Carac heard the distant vibration of metal, and another sound he could not quite place. Its volume, however, seemed to be steadily increasing.

“Probably just some outgassing.” He tried to shrug it off, but noticed it was coming from a nearby maintenance hatch.

Carac pressed his tiny auditory appendages flush against the thick metal. The rumbling increased to a thunder and the unknown sound took on the qualities of an organic vibratory signal.

Suddenly, a small clank.

Shrapnel and dust filled the air as the hatch exploded into tiny pieces. Stunned and injured, but still conscious, Carac picked himself up only to be slammed into the opposite bulkhead by a surprisingly massive body at an incredible speed. His world was consumed by black.

Carac’s companion stared in bewilderment at the situation. The cogs slowly whirred in his head, eventually settling on the decision to raise an alert. He turned to run, but felt a wave of fire torrent over his rear flank and promptly ceased to live.

Rand lowered his smoking gun and removed his helmet and gas mask . He peered down at the body of the creature he had just crushed.

“Well, that’s unfortunate.”

He began to shed his bright orange suit purely on the principle that it would be best to avoid any further attention.

The blaster slid carefully into its shoulder holster and traveled with Rand as he snuck down the hindquarters of the enormous ship.

* * *

“Escort shuttles in range. They’re hailing us.”

Snivvens’ sallow eyes darted to the Comm Officer, “Well respond, damn you! We mustn’t keep them waiting.”

A burst of static met his reprimand, and a green-tinged display erupted into view before him.

“Incoming transmission, sir.”

Before delivering another reprimand, this one for stating the obvious, Snivvens stopped himself as the static cleared. Shocked, he began to kneel, or his species’ awkward equivalent. Before him was the sharp jaw, and strangely sympathetic eyes of The Lord of the Galactic Protectorate.

The Lord Protector surveyed the bridge, with his large black mane flowing about his dark crimson skin as he turned his head. His voice was stately and pleasant, “I was told I would be speaking to Gastril Snivvens, Captain of the *G.P.M. Pyrite*.”

“Present, Lord Protector.” Snivvens cleared his throat, “It is a pleasure to speak with you.”

“Thank you, Captain. My guard and I will be boarding shortly. If you would have the docking bay prepared for my arrival, I would be most obliged.”

“My apologies, but I was not aware you were part of the escort, nor was I told you personally intended to board.”

“Yes, yes,” The Protector smiled widely, his crimson face showing great curiosity, “I have a personal interest in galactic archaeology, and when I was informed of your find, I was most curious to see it for myself. I hear it confirms the presence of life beyond our borders”

“That it does, my Lord.” Snivvens’ eyes drifted back towards the bridge exit. His artifact was sitting a thousand meters away in a leaden lock box, “But, otherwise, it is fairly insignificant. Merely an irradiated piece of poorly machined crockery.”

“Nevertheless, Captain, any evidence of life beyond the Protectorate is impressive news. No galactic civilization we have catalogued has ever extended further than 25,000 light-years from the central worlds.” The Protector paused to catch a breath. “Tell me, have you dated this piece?”

“Yes, we have. We’ve determined an approximate age of-”

“Bup-bup-bup!” The Lord Protector put his hands up playfully, “Let’s save some surprises for my arrival. We will dock as soon as you are ready to have us.”

The galactic leader shrunk into a point of light and disappeared.

Snivvens spun about, “Prep the docking bay! I will meet with the Protector and escort him to the cargo bay myself!”

A flurry of action met his words, and he leapt away, ready to show off his prize.

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With a hack and a slice, Rand had managed to ingratiate himself towards the ship’s internal rapid transit system, but had hit a snag.

“Invalid selection,” A monotone, sharp, yet strangely feminine voice screeched from the panel, “The cargo bay is a restricted area.”

“Sorry, sister. I’m not big on the whole ‘restricted area thing.’” Rand carefully fiddled around with a few wires he had liberated from beneath the dash.

“The cargo bay is a restricted area!” The voice was louder and more grating, this time.

“Oh, shut up!” Abandoning the methodical approach, Rand tore out the nearest bundle of wires. Sparks flew and the transport shot forward.

“Thank you. Please enjoy your ride.” A much calmer voice filled the transport.

“Beautiful.”

* * *

Steel and lead towers, each filled to the brim with fuel-worthy ore, rose up to the ceiling rafters. Crowded together as if to induce claustrophobia, they peered down at the creatures striding through their narrow canyons.

The Lord Protector, clad in a formal suit, had refused any military escort save his personal guard. The clanking of armor drowned out the more subtle clicks of the Protector’s pristine footwear and Snivvens’ raspy breathing.

The trio stopped at a small lead box further dwarfed by its towering brethren.

“This?” The Protector gestured.

“Yes, sir. You may open it if you wish.”

“Is it safe? The radiation-”

“-is within acceptable exposure levels for at least ten to fifteen minutes.”

Snivvens showcased his teeth in what passed as a grin, “You may open it, but I would

have to ask that you refrain from handling it. I apologize, but fragility is an issue for artifacts this dated.”

“No apology necessary Captain,” The Protector’s head nodded, slightly unbalancing the load on his smaller body, “I agree. Care must be taken.”

Snivvens’ slender fingers punched in the access code and the box top slid open. The object shimmered and basked the immediate area with a golden glow, even in the bay’s low lights.

“Impressive.” The Protector felt his hands warmed by the gilded light, “Quite impressive. Especially the condition that you found this in.”

“The drilling of asteroid material is a complex and careful process. Given our experience, however, it was a relatively routine excavation.” Snivvens took pride in his men and his work.

“And you said this was part of an asteroid belt.”

“Yes. A very dense one a few average solar radii away from the red giant. The details of how it got there were not particularly clear. It’s amazing we found it at all. It had a very peculiar radiation signatu-”

The guard placed two of his lithe fingers to his helmet and piped up, “Sir, I’m getting-”

His announcement was cut short by an energy blast to the head. The massive body crumpled to the ground with an armored clank and refused to stir.

Rand rappelled down from the two nearest towers and achieved a graceful landing with his blaster drawn and aimed at his targets.

Snivvens was quick to meet the firearm with his own, drawn from his bandolier.

“Human!” He growled.

“Stop!” The Protector forced Snivvens’ barrel down.

This drew Rand’s attention.

“You.” He snarled with a rage almost primal, and slowly edged the business end of his weapon toward the head of state, “What are you doing here?”

The Lord Protector raised his arms in nonchalant surrender, “I could ask you the same question. I am here to inspect the authenticity of a Protectorate owned historical piece. I suppose your purpose here...” He nodded towards the gun, then back up in a stoic gaze that betrayed a flicker of accusation, “...is less legitimate.”

Rand refused to respond.

“Yes, I know. It’s quite obvious that you’re here to plunder our artifact. Plan to sell it for a bit of scratch. Maybe to save what remains of your pitiful band of refugees.”

“I should kill you right now.” A sudden burning raced through Rand’s muscles, and his outstretched arm began to waver. He cursed himself for the sign of weakness.

“How the mighty have fallen, Rand Jus,” The Protector lowered his arms, and assumed his normal dominant stature, “I admired your courage in the war. Some fond memories. But, frankly, I thought you’d be dead by now.”

“I’m full of surprises.”

“I’m sure.” The Lord Protector smirked smugly.

A short pause, pregnant with hostile emotions, filled the room. Rand broke it.

“Your disease is killing us all.” was growled through gritted teeth.

“The disease, yes,” The Protector strode deftly back and forth across the room, confident that no shot would be fired, “It wasn’t my idea, to be truthful. One of our scientists managed to cook up a particularly brilliant genetic cocktail.”

“I watched my family wither and *die* because of your plague. My wife- children- you damn-” Rand’s tirade was interrupted by a quick burst of flame. A furnace had established itself at the base of his spine, but quickly vanished, “RRGGH-I swear to GOD!”

The Protector stopped and twisted to face Rand, with eerie detachment, “Don’t you dare swear to my God! For thousands of years, you humans marched across the galaxy staking claim upon everything that touched your boots. And when there was nothing left to conquer, you settled down and warred amongst one another, leaving our civilizations in ruin. What wasn’t destroyed then was washed away in the ecological warzones left in your wake. Your people are the plague, Commander. We just decided to, finally, respond in kind. To protect the rest of the civilized galaxy from your blatant disregard for life.”

“You can’t possibly believe that! We are not all savages, Irrguk!”

“Hm.” The Protector’s head tilted in child-like inquisition, “How many have you killed today, Jus? Five? Ten? One hundred?”

He gestured to the limp, armored mass before him, “I’m aware of at least one. And just to steal something that doesn’t belong to you! How characteristically *human!*” For the first time, his voice raised to a growling thunder, “Don’t stand there and tell me this isn’t true. I am not *stupid!*”

Rand stood there, the splitting pain in his muscles accentuated by the accuracy of the Protector's barbs. Suddenly, as if an arc of electricity found its mark between his vertebrae, Rand seized up. The familiar burning sensation reasserted itself and flooded his lungs, and a fit of coughing overtook him. Slowly, Rand crumbled to the ground, spitting out a small pool of blood.

Snnivens, who had, till now, been rapt in the extended oratory, took the chance to prime and aim his gun. Once more, the Lord Protector swatted it away.

The lamp-jawed red face stared in awe, with a hint of amusement, "You're sick, aren't you? The disease now has you, as well."

Rand wiped the blood from his chin with a clenched fist. He stared daggers, but said nothing.

Without warning, the Protector grabbed Snivven's gun and tossed it aside. It slid for a few seconds on the floor before hitting a crate on the far side.

"Take it." The words were spat in an acidic, yet sincere tone, "Claim your spoils."

"What?!?" Snivvens was shocked at the possibility of losing what he believed to be his retirement package. Rand was equally taken aback.

The Protector stepped casually aside and presented Rand with a corridor to his goal.

With a low groan, Rand rose to his feet and stumbled over to the leaden box, which had shut itself during the brief fracas. He grabbed it and found that it was lighter than he had expected.

"Give him the access code, Captain Snivvens."

"But-"

“Do it, Captain.” The Protector’s voice was firm, yet complacent.

“XTX-33” was the blunt reply.

“Now leave, Rand.” The Protector ran his three stubby fingers through his jet black hair, “Just know your efforts will be in vain. Humanity’s fire will be extinguished, and you with it. When that time comes, we will be there to reclaim our artifact. You can be certain of that.”

Rand limped past the two beings and, struggling, began to disappear among the cold, dark towers.

The Protector turned to Snivvens, “You will be lightly compensated for your loss.”

Snivvens remained in silence, his only companion being the waning clicks of the Protector’s shoes. His forelegs scratched the empty metal surface where his treasure once rested. He shuddered. It had suddenly gotten very cold.

* * *

Rand made a few adjustments to his instruments and, after explaining a few of the particulars to Trill, maneuvered the *Pyrite* out of the *Ecliptic*’s docking bay and in to the familiar embrace of vacuum.

He waited till he was out of sensor range and, with a final glare back at the freighter, now a speck against the green emerald of Tigin, made his jump to superluminal.

The stars had long since melded into a hyperspatial tear before Rand succumbed to his itch. He hobbled through the rear of the cockpit and into the makeshift cargo area, a

cramped space once home to injured and dying troops robbed of all morale. Kneeling down at the box, Rand keyed in the code.

The top slid open with a hydraulic woosh, releasing the bright aura into the world. Rand picked up the gilded chalice with care, but it felt confidently solid to the touch. The gold itself did not seem synthetic, which meant it was certainly valuable. Perhaps, this would go a long way to funding those medologists. Rand relaxed and let out a contented sigh.

Then he noticed the crack.

The giant fissure revealed itself as he rotated the cup. Beneath lay a thick foundation of wood. The gold itself was merely a thin coat of metal.

Junk. 50 credits, at most.

Forgetting his sickness, Rand dashed the cup to the floor with one swift stroke. Surprisingly, it did not break, but he wished that it would shatter into elementary particles.

A fit of coughing shook his body as Rand proceeded back to the cockpit.

“Sir?”

Rand drowned Trill’s chirp with swirling, murderous intentions toward a dead, backwater carpenter. That man – no, it couldn’t have been human, not with the way it had crushed humanity’s chances for survival and turned a hopeful savior into a common thief. He wiped the blood onto his sleeve and stared into the hypnotic undulations of hyperspace, his face an expressionless mask that concealed a mind now void of thought and feeling.

Behind him, the cup continued to shine.