

Blue dust. Its innocuous name betrays nothing of its lethality. Heavy particles floating in space, inert unless touched. It gathers into clouds, palls of smoke that wise travelers have learned to avoid. Its origins most certainly lie outside the bounds of this universe. Whether it was fully created elsewhere, or if it is a curious product of the crossing into our volume of space is not known. Either way, it inhabits the Reaches.

Sensors see nothing of its presence, forcing crews to adapt navigation protocols. The canary method has become the de facto standard, a renewal of the approach employed in coal mines centuries earlier, mercifully without the use of live sensors. Arrays of probe drones fly ahead, occupying a pattern wide enough to validate the breadth of the main ship. The probes maintain constant contact via laser communications, far enough ahead for the follower to stop if one flares. While the dust itself eludes sensors, the by-products of contact do not. Probes unfortunate enough to cross its path shine brightly for a few seconds, briefly resembling a distant blue giant star. Rapid decay follows at the molecular level that permeates the entire vessel, reducing it to blue dust itself.

This consumptive process is singular in known science, and has prompted many to suggest it is alive. Refuting these claims as pseudo-science is difficult, given that direct measurement is not possible. Samples cannot be contained. Unlike other particles that annihilate on contact, such as antimatter, blue dust does not respond to magnetic fields, removing the option of holding it in vacuum. Only direct light at close range has captured the slightest glimpse, wherein its color was detected, a deep hue of cobalt infused with indigo.

Gravity is the sole force it deigns to recognize, taunting us by responding to something we cannot directly manipulate. Some have proposed pushing a massive object into a cloud, to see if it would collapse into a smaller, more easily avoided region. None have seen fit to fund this experiment as yet, since no mining company is willing to divert a big pusher away from moving profitable rocks, or so the public reply goes. Lurking in the shadows is the darker concern of creating more blue dust, and of what it might do under pressure of higher gravity. Nobody wants to be the one to cause a cloud to implode, only to have it bounce back and occupy an even larger space, perhaps explosively. Projectile blue dust could render the entire region uninhabitable.

Marking known locations with hazard buoys and keeping maps up-to-date is the only approach that everyone can agree on. Given that shipboard navigation systems automatically avoid buoys of this sort, most people never come within a thousand kilometers of it. Ironically, the group with the most frequent proximal exposure is not the scientific community, but the criminal underworld. They have discovered it to be the ideal place to dispose of bodies with no trace, earning them the somewhat dubious distinction of being the first to find a use for it. Proper scientists were not amused, nevertheless 'disposal of evidence' found its way into enough papers that it is now commonly accepted.

Blue dust is the raw material of nightmares. The one saving grace is that at present it is confined to the Reaches, and shows no signs of moving.