The Reaches

01 : Port of Droyden

“Why do you want to go to the Reaches?” remarked the older man, his eyes narrowing as he asked.

“I need to get out of here."

“That’s a good reason to leave here, not to go there.”

“I heard it’s a good place to lay low.”

“That’s one way to put it. Whoever told you that sugar-coated it.”

“Are you gonna take me or not?”

“Not without a good reason. Even then I make no promises. The Reaches are dangerous even for pilots just doing transport.”

“What do you care? My coin is as good as the next.”

“Most places it’s about the money, yes. Not there.”

“So why do my reasons matter?”

“[waypoint x] is the first drop point. It’s already some ways in. You’ll have started to change by then, driven by your intentions. Subsequent drop points get more severe. I need you to be honest with me. And before you ask, I don’t repeat what I hear.”

She sat pondering her options for a moment. Staying here was not one of them. Most destinations in [near space] were observed, which severely reduced her choices. She’d heard about the Reaches from several people, all of whom she thought were doing some serious embellishing in an effort to sound more impressive. Now she was a more than a little worried they were telling the truth.

She didn't want to tell this guy anything, but she doubted she could find another pilot in time. Fine, play along. Even if he talks, by the time you're away it won't matter. And if you don't get away, it won't matter.

"I carry the thread."

"Oh." He let out a long, slow exhale and turned to look out the window.

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Despite efforts to the contrary the Port of Droyden lived up to every stereotype about frontier towns. Some early incidents involving labor protests turned violent gave it a rocky start, and somehow its reputation went downhill from there. Technology has not changed human nature, so there still exists in every generation a group of people that refuse to play by the rules. Loners, criminals, people escaping their past, fringe religious zealots, and perhaps worst of all – those who seek power outside legal channels. These elements are charged particles ejected from normal society, and some region of space inevitably obtains the right polarity to attract them, and in the process becoming a localized maximum [with a density of malcontents far above the percentage found in the general population].

Many places briefly hold such a mantle, but few retain it. The right set of circumstances must exist else it gets cleaned up by force or it fades from relevance, a fire starved of new fuel. Too close to military routes, population centers or sufficiently rich mining interests will result in boots on the ground and sustained surveillance. Too remote, too dangerous or too hardscrabble will bleed you of traffic, sending commerce into a downward spiral. Even the seediest of places needs a baseline level of commerce to remain relevant.

A handful of places get it just right, ones that lie at the edge of a major sector, on the way to somewhere both important and daunting, straddling the edge of known space and the true frontier, embodying the mythology of a gateway town into a realm of uncertain futures and possible fortunes. Those passing through often have little to lose, drawn by outsized compensation contracts based on the very real dangers of their destinations.

To this crowd Droyden feels like paradise. The real danger has not yet begun, but the rules of polite society havel already been discarded. Bribery is a valid form of business and everything is for sale.

To the authorities it is simply a question of containment. As with any skid row or unsavory district in our history its existence is not a secret, in fact quite the opposite. Experience has shown that it is more effective to keep tabs on something you can see than it is to chase shadows. Make a good show of fighting crime, but not too hard. Remove the obvious dangers without scaring everyone off. If you crack down too hard the worst elements will go dark and set up shop with more caution the next time, causing bigger problems later. Better to contain the mayhem to a known volume of space.

Commander Elleris understood this balance. She ensured her precinct of police made the necessary quota of arrests to keep off-world authorities content that ‘something was being done’, while concurrently maintaining connections to the underworld bosses in the port. She had negotiated a sort of détente with them whereby she ensured that sting operations were only mildly effective, and in return they had pledged to keep violence among ‘those in employ’ and not involve civilians. The overall ‘unnatural death rate’ plummeted during her tenure, reaching levels far below the norm for cities of this sort. She is above all else a pragmatist, with a singular focus on reducing loss of life first, and reducing crime second. Whenever those two came in conflict she almost always chose the former.

Her predecessor Raj Singha considered this approach to be moral relativism and a show of weakness. He followed a strict code of ethics and sought to bring all criminals to justice, regardless how petty the offense. He failed spectacularly. The crime bosses got so fed up with him they eventually called an old fashioned sit-down with him. A real face-to-face, during which Singha was given two options: silver or lead, based on an old Earth tradition carried forth to this day. He declined both options, and was rewarded with lead. Elleris worked hard to ensure such an ultimatum would never be necessary.

“But ma’am we know there is a drug parlor on Sixth and Pier. Lemme go bust it,” pleaded Marcus, a new transfer from core systems.

“I see no reason to do so. They pay their taxes on time, they harm no outsiders and everyone who enters does so of their own free will,” Elleris responded.

“But they are breaking the law.”

“Our first job is to keep people safe, not be their mothers. If someone wants to put transdelics into their bodies or whatever else I have scant concern unless they become violent.”

“But transdelics are illegal, ma’am.”

“Indeed. Thank you for that. I had nearly forgotten,” she replied with a wry smile. “Step back, look at where we are. This is not Earth nor Proxima. If it was that parlor would have been shut down years ago. Out here we have limited resources. If we spend all our time busting recreational transgressions we’ll miss the big stuff. The stuff that gets people killed. Remember, out here we are first keepers of the peace, and secondly keepers of the law. We would need ten times the officers to do both.”

“So, what then? We sit on our hands until someone gets hurt? Seems weak.”

“Relationships. Personal relations will be the conduit for the information you seek. We are not surveilled out here. Face to face is secure, sacred. People that start to use trans too much show signs of instability. I have sources inside the Lotus Parlour that drop discreet hints. We pick up folks before they twig. You go and bust the whole parlor then it all goes dark. You start getting calls to pick up bodies. Relationships are how you get in front of it out here.”

“That’s a bit to take in.”

“Sure. Don’t take my word for it. Go talk to the coroner. He’s a lot less busy now.”

“You serious about no surveillance?”

“Most folks out here are dark,” she replied, which means that they do not show up on the real time network known as the grid.

“Damn, they didn’t say that back at core. What gives?”

“Droyden is a frontier town in the truest sense of the word. When outbound ships pass the boundary layer the surveillance net ends, and everyone knows it. This planet straddles the layer. If we enforced surveil here, half the population would move across the boundary layer, and so would your job. Everybody knows that too, and nobody wants it.”

“I thought that wild west rep was a bunch of overhyped crap and sloppy police work or being being on the take. Looks a little different now.”

“Good. Set aside what you think you know. Your odds of survival go way up.”

[chapter]

The pilot’s gaze remained fixed on Shiela, evaluating her. The thread was an unsubstantiated legend that most people disregarded as a hoax. Verifying it would require access to medical records that may or may not exist, the use of algorithms that few could interpret, and prior knowledge of what you were looking for. Conspiracy theorists loved it, making outlandish claims that nobody could fully disprove, linking the thread back to Earth’s pyramids and every other unexplained phenomenon. Yet she seemed to believe what she is saying.

“How do you know?” he said after some time.

She put her face in her hands and began sobbing. ‘Shit I can’t affort to be weak now’ she thought. But it was too much. Too many nights carrying this, to keep inside. The dam had begun to burst. ‘Fuckitalltohell now. Fuck fucking fuckit. I got nowhere else to go and now I’m spillin it all to some stranger. FUCK!!!’ She wiped her eyes with the back of her sleeve.

“It sort of comes to you over time,” she began. “Sims don’t work right. Surveil chips fry out unexpectedly. Dreams get silent. Alone. Disconnected. You feel small. Smaller than small. Less than that. Everything rounds to zero. You cut loose. Drift. Dark. You say fuckit I give up. Then light. I know that sounds like a bunch of bullshit, but that’s all I got.”

“Who else knows?”

“Wish I knew. For sure DMD, after that I don’t know.”

“I’ll take you.”

Oh thank god.

Once past the boundary, the pilot set a blistering pace through the Reaches with a quiet confidence that can only come from experience. He navigated to a zone of relative stability, to a place not listed on the official maps. Several small planets lay dormant within, remnants of a former solar system that our universe expanded over. He settled the ship within a deep canyon on the largest one, then deployed a portable habitat. They descended the docking gangway, leaving the ship and entering a room substantially larger than any aboard.

“Space to move around,” he offered. “Before you get settled, suit up. The canyon offers a worthy hike.”

“I,” Sheila hesitated.

“Need to talk,” he finished. “We cannot stay here indefinitely. Let us discuss some options for your next move.”

She wanted to argue but she knew he was right. She followed him down the hall to the airlock.

“Gravity is one quarter standard, ideal for moving around.”

“What if someone comes?”

“The ship will tell us. Sensors do not work very far in here, they would have to fly directly overhead at low altitude.” Still seeing doubt on her face, he continued. “Very few besides me know about this moon. We departed the official routes hours ago.”

“Not just official types are after me.”

They finished suiting up and went outside.

“Tell me more,” she heard his voice over the suit’s radio.

“I’ve always known I’m different, but never said much about it. I didn’t want to draw attention to myself. When I was old enough to chip into the grid things got weird fast.”

“You started frying chips. No way to hide that.”

“Right. I played it down and got an over-ear relay, but that’s low bit-rate stuff, nothing like the immersion my friends were getting. When they realized I could not keep up they drifted away.”

The pilot grimaced, recalling his own pain from years ago. Hearing Shelia tell it brought up the memories like they happened only yesterday. She saw his face.

“You too, huh?”

“Very much the same. Abandonment. Disillusion followed.”

“Yeah.” She nodded and went on. “I came to Droyden to get work, since it is one of the few places where you can earn solid income without a chip. I never knew the thing that makes me different was good for anything, not until Droyden. I could only afford cheap housing, Sector 28. Not too bad, but some nasty stuff goes down once in a while. I realized I could feel it coming. My friends, well, my ‘Droyden friends’ started noticing that I’d leave before fights broke out. I started helping them avoid it too. Then *they* noticed. Word got out in the understory that I had the gift. Back on Earth I heard it called the Thread. Out here I've heard Sight and a few other names.”

“Then they sent someone for you.”

“Next day. She was good, too. Almost missed her approach. I got away by a few minutes, but she tailed me. Dropped her at the docks. Right before I got lucky and found your ship.”

“Luck had less to do with it than you think.”

They hiked a few more minutes in silence. The canyon walls rose sharply on either side, framing the view into a ribbon of stars set in a faintly glowing pink sky.

“Wait a sec, how have they not come for you?”

He smiled inside his helmet, glad that she had gotten to this point on her own.

“I was taught how to stop broadcasting it. I only use it when none can overhear.”

“Can I, er, will you,” she fumbled, uncomfortable at the prospect of directly asking someone for help.

“Yes,” he answered graciously. “As for your next question, there is enough time out here for that. We have rations for a few weeks, which is plenty, if you are sufficiently motivated.”

Hope welled up inside her.

“Will I be able to go back to Droyden?”

“Not without a new identity, and some cosmetic surgery. Some things cannot be helped, I’m afraid.”

She bit her lip.

“There are other jobs for people off the grid,” he offered. “But that is not a problem for today.”

She exhaled, and noticed a new lightness to her demeanor. She had not realized the full size of the burden until this moment. She had felt cornered, with no way out, and had accepted that as the baseline for the rest of her life. Now, for the first time that she could remember she felt the presence of the thinnest path, a way forward. She found herself nodding.

“I’m ready.”

[during training]

The confines of her mind dissolved, no longer describing the space she considered as self. Her awareness grew, then drifted.

[later, back in normal space / before crossing the boundary]

Brilliant light flooded the cabin. Dawn in space moves with the subtlety of a hammer on glass, shattering the darkness into razor edged shadows. Light untamed by atmosphere produces contrast levels not visible anywhere else, giving the darkness a density that looks tangible.

Sheila squinted, raising her forearm in defense.

“Haven’t you got any tint for those windows?”

He laughed.

“The best, running at over ninety percent opacity.”

“No shit? Damn, this place is intense.