The brutal severity of their remoteness settled over them as they walked through the Port of Droyden. Subtle differences accumulated, a chorus of small voices combining into a crescendo that demanded to be heard. One-meter-thick windows lined the walls, each secured by bolts the size of forearms. Blast marks stained some corners, bearing silent witness to a tumultuous past. Internal plant life was minimal, indicating that human factors were a second priority. People walked in tight-knit groups, eyeing strangers with suspicion. The aura surrounding Droyden is more than its staggering distance from everything. Its reputation was forged more by what it represents – a gateway to the unknown.

With the exception of Jenks, they had all been off-world from Earth for years, and were accustomed to the strangeness of new destinations. Each planet has its own mystique, ranging from alluring charm to menacing danger, but even to them Droyden defied classification. Like a catastrophe you cannot look away from, Droyden captivates all who come. Raw danger on a galactic scale sits side-by-side with stunning discoveries in entirely new branches of science. And money. In the region of space above the plane of its orbit lie the Farthest Reaches, home to mineral wealth so vast it is not yet possible to estimate. New finds are no longer described in tonnage, but compared in volume to Earth’s moon.

“This place lives up to the hype,” Jenks noted while looking around.

“This place defines the hype,” Ferguson corrected.

As they walked from the docks to the central market, they saw shop after shop selling wares they could not identify. Suit resonance dampeners. Vision stabilizer tablets. Step-downs. Grain-aligning surveying transits. Collimated hull dischargers.

“What goes on out there?” Michaelson wondered aloud.

“If you have to ask, then you do not want to know,” a voice spoke from the right.

They stopped and turned to see a thick man with Asian features smiling at them. Anna stepped forward.

“Inouye?”

“The one and only. You must be Captain Sorensen.”

She nodded.

“Let’s get off the main drag before some of the shadier merchants spot you. They can see first-timers from a mile away.”

“That’s Ok, we know what we are looking for,” Michaelson replied.

A small smile crossed Ferguson’s face, but he kept quiet.

“Famous last words,” Inouye said lightly. “The truth is, you don’t know anything about what you need. You may know your goal, but not much else, not here.”

Inouye stopped and faced them, pausing to make sure he had their attention.

“You will need some of the unorthodox merchandise sold here. The trick is knowing which ones. That’s where I come in.”

They exchanged glances, and came to the conclusion they would be wise to listen and learn. They resumed walking, and soon came to an airlock. Inouye walked in and waited for them to join. They hesitated, looking outside through the dense windows.

“Dome. All buildings have airlocks for breach protocol.”

They stepped in and he cycled the airlock. Massive doors slid into place with a thunk that vibrated the floor, then a light went green. The outer door opened. Their ears popped, then they stepped outside. Inouye saw Jenks tugging on her ear and clenching her jaw.

“Every building and dome is a little different. They are all about the same as two kilometers elevation on Earth, give or take. Cheaper than pressurizing to sea level.”

“Why would that matter? More money flows through here than anyone can count,” Jenks asked.

“Hold that thought. We need to keep moving or the queue at the restaurant will be insufferable.”

He led them on through small parks, past dormitories, and other collections of shops. At the far end of the dome they entered another oversized airlock, identical to the one on the port building. Once through, they stepped into a middle eastern bazaar. A cacophony of color, scents and sounds washed over them in waves. Inouye closed his eyes and inhaled.

“That’s real Jasmine, night-blooming,” he said with a smile.

They continued on past row after row of open stalls selling everything imaginable. After a few hundred meters they turned and climbed a set of stairs that led up through the ceiling of the massive room. They emerged onto a broad promenade with a transparent roof. They all stopped and gasped.

“Come, come. The restaurant has the same view. We are nearly there.”

The promenade exuded wealth. People of every nationality filled the space with conversation and laughter. Two doors down they entered a bistro. The maître d’ greeted Inouye warmly, then ushered them to the back balcony. Anna steadied herself with a hand while she craned her neck to admire the view.

“Oh my god.”

Half the night sky was full of bright young stars from two nearby galaxies. The other half gave off an eerie pink glow. The Reaches. A sharp line divided the two.

They sat down in silence. After a minute of shameless gawking they each turned their attention back to Inouye.

“Everything here is good. I’ll get us started with some hors d’ouevres.”

“None of this was visible before. We must have jumped into the shadow of the planet.”

“A safety measure. The planet shields from flares. The boundary is stable, but a burst leaks out every so often. Now, Ms Jenks, in reply to your earlier question, the money here is spent strategically. We get all types coming in through that port, and I mean *all* types. Some of the gigs here have a life expectancy of six months.”

“Six months? How is that legal? Michaelson asked, his voice incredulous.

“Every three months you get paid half a lifetime’s earnings, compared with a good mining job back on Earth. Electronics cannot function with enough sophistication to be autonomous in there. People are necessary.”

Ferguson whistled quietly, impressed.

“Security here must be interesting.”

“You have a gift for understatement. Security could be described as a gradient. Strongest here, diminishing to very scarce levels in the meaner districts. You would be well-advised to avoid them. Mark sectors 30-39 as off-limits in your hand devices. And before you ask, if we enforced too strictly then they would stop coming. Those in the trade here call it ‘the balance.’

“Are they cordoned off in those sectors?” Anna asked with some apprehension.

“Heavens no! Anyone can freely go anywhere. People entering Sector 19 here know that bad behavior will not be tolerated, and swiftly dealt with. Most of the rougher sorts consider this stuffy and boring, so they don’t bother.”

The appetizers arrived, silencing the room for a few minutes. Jenks resumed staring up at the view, captivated by the slowly pulsing light of the Reaches. Inouye eventually broke the silence.

“So tell me about your exploits on Ceru. Not many people get to witness a genuine alien artifact.”

“If I had known how much red tape and paperwork would follow, I might have kicked dirt over the hole and let the next person find it,” Ferguson said through laughter.

The whole group joined in, filling their portion of the balcony.

“Awe, then fear.” Anna spoke after they had quieted down. “We have no idea how half the systems on that ship work. They were terraforming on a scale we never imagined.”

“We also have no clue how old that thing is. Are they still around?” Michaelson added.

“It felt like swimming in the ocean back on Earth, entering a domain where you are not the apex predator,” Anna continued.

Inouye considered this for a moment.

“The Reaches are not going to help with that sentiment much. Sorry if that bursts anyone’s bubble.”

“Hardly. I think we all realize this place is something different. Can you share a few examples of real things we might encounter out there?”

Inouye thought for a moment.

“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.”

They sat in stunned silence, unable to process the sheer strangeness of what they had just heard. Realization slowly dawned on Michaelson’s face as he made the connection.

“If the stasis chamber we reverse-engineered can hold blue dust it might offer a way to study it.”

Inouye nodded.

“Everyone wants it. The reputable types want to find a way to neutralize it. Others want to weaponize it.”

“That explains the attempted hit,” Jenks interjected.

Inouye raised an eyebrow. Anna nodded solemnly, then looked at Jenks.

“She felt the inbound jump coming, saved us all.”

“Do not repeat that publicly.” He looked around to ensure none had overheard.

“The hit?”

“Her gift.” He saw confusion on their faces. “This is not the place to go into details, but suffice it to say that there are those who would pay a great deal of money to forcibly conscript said talents for their own ends. Permanently.”

Ferguson’s hand moved unconsciously to his belt. Inouye noticed the gesture.

“You would all be well-advised to carry as he does.”

Michaelson’s expression went from uncertain to concerned, then back again.

“I’m still struggling with the ever-present mix of underworld and above-board types. It’s this prevalent anywhere else, except for some worlds that nobody cares to police.”

“Those worlds are largely devoid of resources anyone wants. It comes back to money. And size. The Reaches occupy a region more vast than the Milky Way. Our explorations thus far amount to a rounding error, less than a millionth of a billionth of a per cent, yet we have already discovered more than we can handle. Furthermore, we are on the mildest edge, here at its innermost extent. It is simultaneously exhilarating and terrifying to contemplate what we might find if we figure out how to jump inside that sea of primordial energy.

Given its size, and our inability to jump in there, imagine trying to track a fugitive. Consider also that brute force tactics work very well when coupled with conventional thrust. Without the ability to jump, you cannot surprise a larger adversary and then disappear. There are entire armadas in there, funded by an endless supply of wealth.”

“Sounds like the Chicago mob back in prohibition,” Anna observed.

“An accurate comparison. We are in the Las Vegas phase of that analogy. Some have acquired enough that they can legitimize their core businesses, while keeping the edges gray.”