

Area Seven

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*Non era ancor di là Nesso arrivato,
quando noi ci mettemmo per un bosco
che da neun sentiero era segnato.*

The data alarm squealed like a frightened small animal. The ship shuddered as we braked and the com screen went blank for an instant, then kicked back up. Servos whirred in the nose below us.

We'd been slipping along at an altitude of a thousand meters in one of C Survey's mapping skiffs. I'd been asleep, off duty.

"Your turn," Tessa said. The tired way she leaned over her console, her face pinched in the pale light, seemed an image of the strain she'd been under.

"I went out yesterday," I said. "Christ, don't you remember?" Tessa and I had a history that went back before we were posted to crew-on the way out, we'd even talked about something more permanent between us-but it was affecting me too, a corrosive presence that had dogged the survey since we'd entered the system. In the past few weeks I'd gotten so melancholy I'd taken to paging through *Rational Death* and imagining cryogenic nights that never end.

You think I'm kidding. I wish.

"A motility sensor tripped the alarm," she said evenly. "And you're the exo, Serge."

I scanned the data. "Movement's in the box for atmosphere," I said.

"Something replicates."

"Crystals replicate," I muttered. I studied an image from the planet on the belly camera, zoomed in.

On a gloomy, mottled surface, trunk-like forms rose in a vaguely regular way, like a surreal forest. "Where are we?" I asked.

"Fair question. The com link cut out as I was running the program to clear waypoints. There's a glitch-it's been happening all over the fleet. Now that we're darkside, we won't get another fix until the planet's rotated or we can do the astronomy. Area Seven, I could say that, we're in Area Seven. But where *is* Area Seven? We can't exactly say that."

"Nice," I sighed.

"Warm down there."

I remembered a place on a holo. It tugged at the edge of my memory, but I couldn't quite pull it into focus. "What happens to the surface in the direction of the equator? We've got the astronomy for that."

She toggled video from the first flyover, and the screens displayed a plain of burning sand. “Melt the skids,” she said.

“In the other direction?”

The screens went dirty red. “Some of the surface is moving up there—little surges, unstable. See that? Dense liquid. And that color. Like unhealthy rust.” Tessa pursed her lips. “Creepy.”

“Let’s hover, do the rest of the astronomy and get a decent fix. I’ll suit up and go down.”

I didn’t like the drugged sleep I’d been getting. The neurologicals gave me vivid dreams. That cycle the dreams had been bleak memories from the home planet, the blasted landscape of a tropical volcano: a high caldera streaked with recent lava flows, cinder cones, a fire pit. And I saw what I hadn’t been able to remember: a path among trees inundated by ash, snaking through gnarled forms. It had a name on a weathered sign: *Desolation Trail* .

When my boots touched the surface, I picked up a sound-indistinct, distant, busy, like the noise on the Daedalus bridge when C Survey shipped out. “Tessa. You hear that?”

“All I hear is your breathing. Would you believe me if I told you it makes me think about how we used to keep each other warm at night?”

She’d kept both of us warm. For months, back when we were staging on Beta Proculis, for example, she’d nursed me through one exotic virus after another, jury-rigging IV lines to keep my fluids up, cooling my forehead, running samples into the upload trays. When I finally got back on my feet after two months, I felt smothered. I just wanted to push everything away.

For a while, she’d been all there was to push.

The planet’s gloom was palpable. I checked my uplink, the atmospherics in my suit. Still, the murmuring-unintelligible, yet almost human. “Don’t you hear . . . way in the background? Maybe from another crew?”

“Serge, all I hear is your breathing.”

You don’t go around insisting to your shipmates, or your former lovers, or both, that you’re hearing voices. I held my tongue.

“Roger that,” I said. “I’ll start the report.”

“Mark.”

“Planet’s surface appears to be a smooth basaltic flow, cat-six origin, nonfriable, solid under my boots, reticulated. I’m standing among these angular, branching forms. One to three meters high, three to nine segments, rough-surfaced—with shallow furrows—like . . . like nothing I’ve ever seen before.” Whatever they were, they stretched into the distance, hundreds, perhaps thousands of them, to a misty blue horizon. I made a mental note to do a grid count. “Experiencing spurious audio.”

I raised my specimen hammer—I was trained as a geologist, and my first impulse is to chip away a bit and look beneath the surface. But that day I hesitated, then touched the strange shape before me with my glove. “Structurally variated skin,” I said. “Not metallic or obviously mineral. You can get your fingers around small segments. . . .”

Tessa's voice- "Need any instrumentation down there?"

"Let me first try to just . . . collect a sample."

Beneath my thick gloves, I felt a rough section, half the size of my hand, give slightly, then snap through, like boxwood.

It was the strangest experience I've ever had in space. The background murmur I'd been hearing became a voice, and the voice became comprehensible.

Why do you break me? it said.

"Tessa," I said, "did you copy that?"

A pause. She sounded exhausted. "Copy to, 'collect a sample.' "

I stepped back. Where I'd fractured the trunk, a red liquid oozed like quicksilver. While I watched, it filled the bowl of the wound and darkened, like blood in air.

As it did so, I heard the voice again, a girl's voice.

Why do you tear me? Is there no pity in your soul?

"Your vitals are spiking," Tessa said in my helmet.

"No problem," I lied, feeling my skin crawl. I'll tell you how far gone I was-I didn't want to talk to Tessa. I didn't want to talk to anybody. In that bleak place, I just wanted to sink into the blanketing, apocalyptic darkness that I heard in that voice, some quality in it that touched me like the song of an icy Siren. "Something I want to . . . sort out here," I mumbled. "Shutting down audio."

"Serge. . . ."

I found the line and toggled out.

"Anyone there?" I whispered, and touched the wound with my hammer.

We were beings before we were changed into sticks.

Your hand might have been more merciful

Had we been souls of rats or ticks.

As I watched, my mind was flooded with another home-planet memory. We were camping, the night had become chilly, and my younger brother had put a log into the fire, a green log that had been set aside to dry. When one end started smoldering, heat forced sap bubbling out the other, dripping and hissing. In just that way, both fluid and words together sputtered from the wound in the strange shape before my eyes.

I was so startled that I dropped my hammer. My mouth was so dry it was a struggle to speak. "Who are you?"

We took our lives. Now each dawn in the sun's rising light,

Heat breaks us. We moan, we bleed, we speak, but do not move.

Oh, traveler, what strange love brings you in harrowing night?

At the edge of my vision, the ship's com light began flashing on my helmet array. I toggled up audio.
"Tess. . . ."

"I'm pulling you up, Serge. I don't know what's going on down there, but I'm pulling you up."

"I'm going back for another sample," I told Tessa.

"You're crazy. Your vitals are all over the place. I checked your support gasses. Trace anomalies, but what else would explain it? Problem's got to be in your backpack."

"Nothing's wrong with my suit," I said. "I told you, I'm hearing voices down there. Don't you remember Takahishi's report from the skiff on the second planet? They thought they were getting some weird geomagnetic overlay. The data they were pulling up-Takahishi mentioned voices."

"And what are they telling you?" she asked patiently.

"The voice . . . She said they were-they all were-suicides."

Tessa looked at me mournfully, pulling on the locket I had given her. "Are you being ironic?"

"No, no. I broke off a . . . section, and . . . it began bleeding, the trunk began bleeding, and while it bled, it spoke. I thought about it in the air lock. The way a human suicide communicates is through spilling blood. The process, the mechanism, makes a kind of sense. A suicide expresses himself . . . or herself . . . through the flowing of his or her blood, that's the way they speak to us. There's something familiar. . . ."

"Serge . . . ?"

I rubbed my forehead. "Anything on the sensors?"

"Nothing. The data from your suit's the only anomaly."

"I'll wear my other suit. You do the chemistry. I'm going down again as soon as the backup's ready."

Two hours later, despite Tessa's protests, I picked my way across the surface again. As they had before, the murmurs surrounded me like the blue haze that obscured the skiff. This second deployment was different-of course, it's always eerie stepping across alien crust, but, this time, I was gripped by the knowledge that each note in that solemn chorus could be that of a separate being. The forms stretched to a purple horizon. When I started to lay out a reference grid, I registered the enormity of what I saw, and felt overwhelmed, disoriented. In a moment of panic I swung around awkwardly, looking for the skiff. I stumbled, and fell.

Ah, no! Please let me die!

Another woman's voice. I looked around and at first saw nothing. Then I looked below my knees and realized that I had fractured a slim trunk with my fall. Thick red quicksilver oozed from a long fracture.

"Forgive me," I murmured as I pushed myself up.

Raped by troops at Montaperti, I wept hot tears.

They cut the hand that held the flag!

Drowned am I and shamed ten thousand years.

The place she had named, Montaperti, I recognized it! Now I knew what seemed familiar—a battle lost because the arm of a guidon bearer had been hacked through by a traitor, an army of sixty thousand slaughtered for want of direction.

She was a character from the Hell of Dante's *Inferno*, from the first realm of *The Divine Comedy*, a world of suffering, regret, and timeless punishment.

I know, it sounds impossible. But as I stood there, my senses alive with a clarity I had never experienced before, I took in a landscape in which all the pieces fit: the segmented forms—like leafless trees in a haunted wood—the speaking blood, the suicide victim from Montaperti. I could fix my place even more precisely: I was apparently within the region of the Violent, in the ring of Dante's *Inferno* reserved for those who had violated their persons by taking their own lives. Only those sinners were punished by the peculiar transformation I beheld before me.

I'd read the poem at the academy. We'd been given a passage, and I'd gotten lost in the story and devoured the whole thing, my imagination swept away by an inspired professor.

Sputtering words and blood, the sad spirit before me described a feud between two great houses—an innocent girl jilted, left standing at a chapel altar—the very feud that had shaped Dante's world.

I stood there transfixed, listening for time out of mind, mesmerized by the soft velvet of her voice as she incanted the lines: the jilted girl was avenged by her brother, who murdered the groom. The groom was avenged by the murder of the girl. The war that followed ravaged the countryside, bled generations, and destroyed the great ancient city of Florence. Eventually her words grew quiet and I recognized that the broken breathing I was listening to was my own. When I looked, the fracture had all but healed.

I checked my com status: all the ship's channels were lit like holiday decorations. Without thinking, I had cut myself off from Tessa again—but what could I tell her?

"I'm getting a low-frequency crawl from the other skiff on the planet," Tessa said when I'd toggled back into the ship's com system. Her voice was clipped with anxiety. "They're calling in an 'emergency event.'"

"Any details?"

"No, but listen to this. A skiff's lost on the first planet. Some kind of geomagnetic disturbance is tripping up rescue—all sorts of equipment down. Survey teams across the fleet reporting very strange data."

I could have told her then, and perhaps I should have, but words would just not come. How could I convince her that what I had heard, what I had seen, was real without triggering an emergency of my own? I checked my life support. Gasses in the nominal range, though I was building CO₂ too rapidly—hyperventilating? I had only an hour left in Area Seven, at the outside.

"I want to come down and get you."

The thought of Tessa on the surface, of both of us losing track of time, made me shiver. "Just . . . a few more minutes," I said. "Whatever you do, stay with the ship. We need someone to stay with the ship."

“Serge. . . .”

“Tessa, stay with the ship.”

From other suicides I heard more war stories—one from a foot soldier who ran from battle but ironically found the courage to slit his own throat rather than face his sergeant. A large, doubled form, situated on a low rise, the smaller shape entwined around the larger, turned out to be the painful twin suicide of an exiled father and son.

Further north, they told me, lay the spirits of the conventionally violent, the murderers, the terrorists, the thugs, wallowing in a river of ancient, boiling blood. South of us, towards the planet’s equator, on a plain of sand so hot that it suggested planetary processes fleet had never encountered before, resided those guilty of more refined versions of the sin, the perverse, the falsifiers, perpetrators of violence against nature on its most fundamental level.

When I finally turned back toward the skiff, an even taller shape caught my attention. It stood apart, a full meter higher than anything else in sight, erect, with a kind of stately bearing. My life support was hovering near reserve, but I made my way over.

I ran my hand over its surface. I used my hammer to pry a section free. In its place on the trunk the blood-red quicksilver bubbled out, as if under pressure.

“Speak to me,” I whispered. “Tell me who you are.”

A sad voice answered:

I was the next to rule.

I held the keys to the noblest heart

Of all the lords. Envy turned all against me,

Envy was the start.

He had been regent and it was said of him that he knew his lord’s mind even before his master did. The old inner circle grew jealous, whispered of his complicity with a rival faction, ties to an exiled commander. They had him arrested.

Once in the damp prison, he was tortured. When he would not reveal his lord’s battle plans, they took a fine hot wire and pierced his eyes. The pain, he said, was inexpressible.

Locked in his cold cell, without even a cord to hang himself by, he marshaled his strength and began to beat his head against the wall. He beat and fell, and rose and beat again, crushing his skull against the stone until he felt nothing, saw nothing, and heard nothing at all.

I swear, that never in word or spirit did I,

Peter of the Vine, break faith with my lord.

Oh traveler, vindicate my memory!

I remembered him from Dante! Pier della Vigne, Peter of the Vine!

It moves me even now to think that, though many there had ended their lives out of shame, or cowardice,

many others had done so in a search for honor or in pursuit of relief from unfathomable pain. Yet they all shared the punishment by the means I saw before my eyes, and pain inhabited every shape. How could I understand their sin? A failing in each of them, a turning away from life, from the heart of things? Story after story suggested it, each half fairy tale, half tragic history, life stories from a fantastic world of lost beings.

I was aware I was running out of time from the visuals I was getting from Tessa on my helmet array. In the end, I toggled down even that display, listening to my own breathing and the hypnotizing voices of the figures before me.

I don't know what broke the spell-the light on the horizon, rising voices, Tessa's insistent calls on the override com circuit. At some point I toggled the skiff back online, but only to silence the suit alarm.

"Serge, we are listing emergency event. Please respond. Repeat. Emergency event. Planetary rotation critical and dangerous. Repeat. Emergency event. Your life support numbers are degrading and surface time's approaching terminus. Repeat, Serge, surface terminus. This is urgent. Whatever minutes you've got, when you see the sun, the temp's going to exceed your suit's cap. Please respond."

I swayed, fought for balance, as the blue world seemed to spin around me. My experience had shriven my soul-now my own problems seemed inconsequential, my own depression trivial and self-indulgent. I felt I had been granted a vision, but would I be able to make sense of it?

I knew it was too late now for Tessa to launch a rescue. Had I, I wondered, come down to enact my own suicide? Was that what it all meant?

The light on the horizon was resolving into a bright pillar of fire. A rising heat, beyond the already elevated temps of the planet, had begun fracturing the shapes. Around me, the murmuring was coalescing into cries and weeping, appeals and rants. Another memory from the home planet: lava falling from a low cliff into the sea, boiling waters, the awful rending cry of a torn landscape-I thought I heard it now on a rising wind.

That's when I made out Tessa's voice on the com channel, throaty with desperation and fatigue. In my mind's eye I could see her in the dim light. "Oh, Serge, it's too late now. I don't know why you've been so sad. I should never have let you go. I should have come down. I can only tell you how much I love you-I wish you'd get it, Serge, wish you'd understand. I need you. You always thought it was the other way around-*Ineedyou* . I don't know what I'm going to do without you. . . ." She went on for a while-and then all I could hear was quiet weeping.

Something . . . snapped in me. It felt it like a small electrical charge, and from that tiny impulse I struggled against inertia and finally turned back toward the skiff. Tessa was firing off seismic rounds to get my attention, but I have to tell you, they weren't what made me move.

I credit Tessa herself, the quality of her heart. It was what I could hear in her weeping, her willingness to reach out to me even after I seemed lost. She saved me that way, I think, touched my own heart, turned me away from the sad death I was surrounded with and was sinking toward, turned me back toward the ship. I've thought about it a lot since then. Really, it was Tessa who saved me.

I stepped heavily toward the lift cable. My suit felt as if it had turned to lead. I could see heat rising around me in visible wisps from the surface, shapes running with blood, I could hear a rising chorus of voices, howling as one. . . .

Eventually, the sunlight was so bright, so shot through with high-frequency yellows and pale, shimmering

blues, that it was as if I was passing through flames themselves, as if my body was stepping through the heart of some strange fire. Voices screaming around me, white light devouring my sight, I found the heavy cable and clenched it in my hand.

That very day they pulled us out. They pulled us *all* out, all the skiffs, the whole C Survey. Only when we were all assembled for the journey back did we come to understand the depth of the trouble we'd been in. Two crews had been lost out of twenty-two, two entire skiffs. Think of it-almost one out of ten of us didn't make it back. We lost tons of instrumentation and equipment. All for nothing-navigation errors corrupted every bit of the data. Besides the serious stuff, there were dozens of accidents, accounts of bizarre experiences like mine. As you know, the survey's become something of a legend. You hear about it in the service bars, in the NCO clubs. All sorts of wild stories-as if what happened wasn't wild enough!

The official line is that crews suffered under a kind of mass delusion, that some set of circumstances stressed us collectively. It caused us, as skiff crews, to translate our responses into the discourse of Dante's imagination.

But the data's not that coherent. I don't think one in ten of us, of the crews on station, had actually read the poem. It hadn't been on my mind for years.

Takahishi has an alternate explanation. He thinks that we stumbled onto one of the cosmos' gallery of amazements, an alien race who took the transmissions that we humans have been flooding the galaxy with for a thousand years now-all the great works of art, our genome, our technology, our languages and works of literature, the details of history and daily life-and reconstructed a medieval Catholic milieu to test us once we arrived on their doorstep.

I don't know. Why Dante? Why would they be so specific? Still, maybe Takahishi's right. Extraordinary events require extraordinary explanations. Imagine for a moment that Takahishi's explanation is true-a sun with three planets on which strange intelligences live out eternities enacting ideas that come from such a profound distance. Who could these intelligences be?

Personally I think the truth lies between the two explanations, that it's stranger than even Takahishi imagines. Perhaps what happened to us can be seen as a message from the beings of that system. They accessed our computers, looked for a set of stories to describe us to ourselves. Maybe they knew what we had in mind for them-we'd come looking for planets to rearrange and terraform, after all. It could be that they took our inner lives, dramatized punishments for our mission, made them personal, and cast us away. I don't know.

Of course, the way we're finding minerals in the Arcturus sector nowadays, it'll be a long time before we get back to that three-planet system to figure out what really went on. Tessa and I have talked about it a lot. She thinks it'll be at least a thousand years before we get back there. Morgan agrees. The system's out of the way, he says, and there's just no percentage in going back.

Now, if you'll be seated, Tessa will bring you some refreshments, and I'll tell you some of the other stories we heard. We've got quite a bit of material from the fragmentary data, from the transcripts, from the reports. About the first planet. I don't know much about the other two. That data's been classified from the start. Morgan claims that the third planet-where we lost those two crews without a trace, first one crew and then the other that was sent to look for them-was a version of Paradise. Perhaps they're in some kind of heaven, or maybe they died only thinking they were living out their fantasies.

Anyway, as for the planet Tessa and I were scouting, the first planet, we have some images to show you as well. Thank you, Tessa. See if you can make out the human shapes punished in what looks like an icy

storm, or bodies ravaged by the swipes of snarling beasts. I know the images aren't quite clear, but these are things survey crews claimed they saw, or heard, much as I did the bleeding suicides. The reports especially shake the soul—we have one of a woman, her intestines spilled from her body, who holds her severed head by its black hair like a lantern. I don't remember her from Dante. At the planet's south pole, Morgan claims he saw living shapes ripped and gnawed by packs of hydra-headed monsters. Is this a peek into the alien world? A hidden part of Dante's? Ours? What a savage place the imagination can be!