

Sea of Death

by

Neal Asher

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Under the pall of a transparent night,
Like solemn apparitions lull'd sublime,
To everlasting rest, - and with them Time
Slept, as he sleeps upon the silent face
Of a dark dial in a sunless place.
-Hood.*

To say it is cold is to seriously understate the matter. The inside of the shuttle is at minus fifty centigrade because of what Jap calls 'material tolerances'.

"These coldsuits we're wearing - take 'em above zero and they'll fuck up next time you use 'em outside," he told me.

"Yeah," I said. "Two centuries ago I'd have believed you, but things have moved on since then."

"Economics ain't," was his reply.

I am careful not to respond to his sarcasm.

The landing is without mishap, but I am surprised when the side of the shuttle opens straight down onto the surface of the planet Orbus.

"No point maintaining an entrance tunnel," says Jap over the com.

I don't mind. It is for moments like this that I travel, and it is moments like this that fund my travel. I walk out with CO2 snow crunching underfoot and the clarity of starlit sky above you normally only get in interstellar space. I gaze across land like arctic tundra with its frozen lakes and hoared boulders. In the frozen lakes trapped fairie lights flicker rainbow colours.

"What's that?" I ask.

"Water ice, below one-fifty it turns to complex ice and when it heats up and changes back it fluoresces. Talk to Duren if you want the chemistry of it."

I don't need to. I remember reading that this is what comets do. It had taken a little while for people to figure that the light of comets was not all reflected sunlight - that comets emit light before they should.

"What's heating it up?" I ask, turning to gaze at the distant green orb of the dying sun.

"The shuttle, our landing. There's nothing else here to do it," he replies.

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sun.

“The shuttle, our landing. There’s nothing else here to do it,” he replies. We walk the hundred or so metres to the base and go in through a coldlock. In the lock we remove our coldsuits and hang them up. Jap points to the white imprint of a hand on the grey surface of the inner door.

“Keep your undersuit and gloves on until we’re inside,” he tells me. I stare at the imprint in puzzlement. Is it some kind of safety sign? Jap obviously notes my confusion. He explains.

“Fella took his gloves off before going through the door,” he says. The imprint

is the skin of that fella's hand, and some of the flesh too. Later I speak to Linser, the base commander, and ask why they take such risks here. We stand in his room gazing out of a panoramic window across the frozen wastes.

“Thermostable and thermo-inert materials are expensive, Mr Gregory. A thermoceramic cutting head for a rock-bore costs the best part of fifty thousand New Carth shillings and has to be shipped in. Doped water-ice cutting heads can be made here. Coldsuits that can function from plus thirty to minus two hundred cost fifty times as much as the ones we use. That's a big saving for a small inconvenience,” he says.

“I never thought this operation short of funds,” I say.

“Energy is money and there’s none of the former here. It costs fifteen hundred shillings a minute to keep one human alive and comfortable. We have over two thousand personnel.”

I walk up beside him and focus on what has now caught his attention. Machines for moving rock and ice are busily gnawing at the frozen crust out there. Floodlights bathe something that appears a little like a building site.

“Found an entrance right under our noses,” he tells me.

“Lucky,” say I.

He turns to me with an expression tired and perhaps a little irrational.

“Lucky? ... Oh yes, you’ve been in transit. You haven’t seen the latest survey results. You see, we were having a bit of a Schroedinger problem with the deep scanners. The energy of the scan was enough to cause fluorescence of the water ices down there, full spectrum fluorescence. It was like shining a torch into a cave and having the beam of that torch turn on a floodlight. We saw only a fraction of it until we started using those low-energy scanners.”

“A fraction?” I say. “Last I heard you’d

mapped twenty thousand kilometres of tunnels.”

“That’s nothing. Nothing at all. They’re everywhere you see. Yesterday Duren told me that they even go under the frozen seas. We’re looking at millions of kilometres of tunnels, more than a hundred million burial chambers with one or more sarcophagi in each.”

I absorb this information in silence, slot it in with a hundred other details I’ve been picking up right from Farstation Base to here.

“Obviously I want to see one of the sarcophagi,” I eventually tell him. He glances at me.

“See and touch it I would have thought. Unfortunately you don’t get to smell anything. Too cold for decay here,” he says.

“Seeing and hearing are the most important,” I reply. “Most people don’t go for full immersion for a documentary. There are much more enjoyable FI entertainments.”

“Okay, get yourself settled in and we’ll run you down in an hour or so. Will you be needing any of your equipment off the shuttle?”

“No, I have my eyes and ears,” I reply.

He studies me, his inspection straying to

the aug' nestled behind my right ear. He seems too tired to display the usual discomfort of those confronted by a human recorder like myself.

The tunnels resemble very closely the Victorian sewers of Old London on Earth. The bricks are made of water ice and are, on the whole, over three quarters of a million years old. A strange juxtaposition of age and impermanence. Just raise the temperature and all the tunnels will be gone. Of course, the temperature will not rise here for many thousands of years. Duren, who walks with me to the first chamber, is distracted and gloomy. I have to really push to get anything out of

him. Finally he comes out with a terse and snappy summation.

He tells me, “It will keep on getting colder and colder, but not constantly so. Every eight hundred years we get the Corlis conjunction and the resultant volcanic activity. In about a hundred thousand years Corlis will fall in orbit round here and all hell will break loose for a time. The volcanic activity will destroy all these tunnels, melt all the ice. That’ll last for a few hundred years then things will settle down and freeze again.”

“So future archaeologists will have to dig the sarcophagi out of the ice?” I ask. He waves his hand towards a side

chamber and we duck into there. The lights inside are of a lower luminescence than those outside. They don't want the light damaging things, apparently.

“Doubt that. Hundred thousand years and we'll know all we need to know about this place. We'll let them sleep in peace then.”

I study at him and try to figure the tone of his voice. It is too difficult to read his expression through his coldsuit mask, though.

The sarcophagi are metallic chrysalides averaging three metres in length. I say metallic because they appear to be made

of brass. I am told that they were made of something very complex that does have as its basis some copper compounds. I ask if it is organic. I am told no it is manufactured - it isn't complex enough to be organic. There are two sarcophagi in the chamber. One off alone, untouched and easily viewed, the other so shrouded in scanning equipment, I do not know it is there until Duren tells me I can look inside.

No one has yet opened a sarcophagus, simply because there is not a lot more to be learned that has not already been learned by scanning. Inside each sarcophagus, suspended in water ice that is thick with organic chemicals, is an

alien. These aliens are frightening. What is most frightening about them is how closely they resembled us. They have arms and legs much in proportion to our own. Their bodies are longer and wasp-waisted, their feet strange hooked two-toed things, and their hands equally as strange, with six fingers protruding from all sorts of odd points, and no palms. Their heads ... how best to describe their heads? Take an almond and rest it on its side, expand it only where the neck joins it, hang two sharp barbs at the nose end and back from that punch a hole straight through for eyes. ... It is theorised that they had used some kind of sonar sense. This is one of the theories. When the first sarcophagus was found

people started to bandy about phrases like

‘parallel evolution’ while others claimed credence for their own pet theories. Those of a religious bent called the discovery proof of the existence of God, though the self-same people had heretofore claimed that the discovery of no humanlike races had also been proof of the existence of God. Some claimed the discovery evidenced ancient alien visitations of Earth, whilst still others talked of interstellar seeding. How so very personal, human, and petty is each theory. Coming to make my documentary about the catacombs of Orbus and the passing destruction of the moonlet Corlis

I have not thought which of them to give credence.

“Do you think it’s parallel evolution?” I ask Duren as I peer through the scanner.

“Does a scorpion look like a human? It evolved under the same conditions and even on the same planet,” he says, and totally destroys the parallel evolution argument.

“What about interstellar seeding?”

“Same arguments apply,” he replies, and of course they do.

“God?” I ask.

He laughs in my face then says, “I try to understand it. I don’t try to cram it in to fit my understanding.”

He definitely has the essence of it there.

I hesitate to call this my first night here as there is little to mark the change from day to night. You could go outside and spot the sun in the sky, but as Orbus revolves about it once every three solstan centuries that wouldn’t be much help. The personnel at the base work a shift system. My waking period concurs with that of Duren, Jap, and about five hundred others who I have yet to meet. After a night of mares in which I am chased down Victorian sewers by subzero rats I wake to a day of

subterfuge and obfuscation. Something has happened and people either don't know or don't want to tell the nosy bastard from the Netpress. I use the most powerful weapon in my armoury to get to the bottom of it. Jap takes my bribe. We don coldsuits in the ball-shrinking coldlock and step on out. Jap leads me to one of the tracked surface cars they call a crawler and we motor over to the nearby excavation. I still find it difficult to take in that the treads of the vehicle we ride in are made of doped water ice. The whole idea of using such a substance makes me see our civilization as so delicate, so temporary. I guess my objection is that this is the truth.

The excavation is a tunnel that cuts at thirty degrees through rock and ice into the side of one of the Victorian sewers. This is the way I had come yesterday with Duren to view the body, so to speak. We climb out of the crawler and Jap approaches a suited figure who is walking up from the slope.

“What’s happening, Jerry?” Jap asks over the com. He’d told me to keep my mouth shut and my ears open for the present.

The woman who replies sounds tired and irritated.

“Duren flipped. He cut open the sarc in B27 and started to thaw out the chicken.

Security got on to him and he took his crawler into the system.”

Jap says, “Always thought he was a bit too close to ’em. He was on it from the start wasn’t he?”

“You know he was,” says the woman, her irritation increasing. I wince: Jap isn’t very good at subterfuge.

“What’s happening now?” he quickly asks.

“They still haven’t found him and the computer quite competently tells us that for every hour we don’t find him our chances of finding him halve. Ain’t technology wonderful?”

“What about the sarcophagus and the corpse?”

“Linser says waste not want not or some such ancient bullshit. He’s having them moved inside for intensive study. ... Here they come now.”

I stare down the slope and see one of the crawlers towing something up the slope. I glance round at Jap and make the hand signal he had only recently taught me. We both switch our com units to private mode.

“The Corlis intersection is in two solstan days. Would this Duren survive that?” I ask.

Jap replies, “Depends where he is, but yeah, most likely, though not much beyond it. His suit would have to go onto CO₂ conversion after a day and that drains the power pack.”

“So he’d freeze and join the rest of them here.”

“That about sums it up, yeah.”

Corlis is hammering towards us at fifty thousand kilometres per hour; pretty slow in cosmological terms. It is the size of Earth’s moon and not much different in appearance. Its major differences are its huge elliptical orbit and the smattering of ices on its surface. It will pass close enough to Orbus to perturb

both their orbits. Orbus's orbit by only a fraction, Corlis's orbit will wind in a completely different spirograph shape round the sun. This has been happening for about three quarters of a million years and is set to change, in a hundred thousand years, when Corlis will finally be captured by Orbus. It's funny, but I find most of the scientific staff rather reluctant to discuss the coincidence of dates: the aliens have been frozen for the same length of time that Corlis has been on its erratic orbit. Only Linser has anything useful to offer.

“These tunnels, chambers and sarcophagi are all that survived the disaster that sent Corlis on its way, or

maybe, they are all that survived Corlis's arrival in this system. The tunnels survived because they are so deep. There was probably a surface civilisation but it's all gone now."

It doesn't ring true.

"When Corlis passes here tomorrow, will we be safe?" I ask.

"Oh yes. The nearest disturbance will be five hundred kilometres away at a fault line," Linser replies. I get him to show me exactly where on a map then thank him for his help before going off to see if I can steal a crawler. It is a surprisingly easy task to accomplish.

Just kilometre after kilometre of brick-lined tunnels. To begin with I stop at a few side chambers but find them all depressingly the same. A map screen inside the crawler shows my current position and just how far I have to go. A quick inspection of the mapping index gives me files filled with thousands of such pages, and directories filled with thousands of such files. Linser told me they had mapped but a fraction of the system. I have to wonder if there is any point in continuing - it obviously covers the entire planet and is much the same everywhere. While I am studying this screen a message flicks up in the corner and is also repeated over my coldsuit com.

“Alright everybody, we’re not going to find him before conjunction. I want you all back at base by twelve hundred, Linser out.”

I look at the message in the corner of the map screen and realise that the only reason I have not been caught is that a lot of crawlers are out being used in the search for Duren. It only occurs to me now that all the crawlers must have some sort of beacon on them, some way that they can be traced, and that Duren must have disabled it on his own. I immediately try to use the crawler’s computer to find out more about the beacon. On the menu I get beacon diagnostics and a hundred and one things

I can do with said beacon. I cannot find where the damned thing is though.

“Number 107, didn’t you get my message?”

Linser sounds a bit peeved. I ignore him while I continue to try and locate the beacon.

“Ah, I see,” say Linser. “That crawler is not your property, Mr Gregory.”

I decide it is time for me to respond. “I’ll return it to you in one piece,” I say.

“How very civil of you. You do realise you’re heading directly for the nearest fault line; an area that is going to become

very dangerous in only a few hours from now?”

“Yes, I do know,” I reply. “I’m sure that’s where Duren is.”

There is a pause, then when Linser speaks again it is with a deal of irritation.

“So you think we have not already searched Duren’s most obvious destination?”

he asks.

I feel a sinking in the pit of my stomach, but stubbornness prevents me from turning the crawler round.

“You may have missed him,” I say.

“Well,” Linser replies. “If you are intent on getting yourself killed then that is your problem. We will bill Netpress for any damage to the crawler and for the recovery of your body. Good day to you Mr Gregory.”

He manages to make me feel like a complete idiot and I nearly turn back, but the stubbornness remains. It has been pointed out to me that stubbornness is not strength. It is in fact a weakness. I keep driving. Two hours pass and the first tremor hits. As tunnel vibrates and little flecks of ice fall onto the crawler’s screen, I replay the conversation I’d had with Duren as we walked back to his

crawler after viewing the dead alien:

“Most people would wonder if they are in cryostasis,” I had said.

“They’re not,” Duren replied. “They are decayed even though they were pickled in brine before that brine froze.”

“Were they all preserved at the same time?” I asked.

“Oh yes.”

“How do you account for that then: a hundred million of them going into their sarcophagi at the same time?”

Duren was silent for a while. I didn’t

push him.

“I did say that they are not in cryostasis,” he said. “I did not say that some attempt may not have been made to put them in such.”

“Is that what you think?”

“It’s one possibility. Other possibilities include mass murder and mass suicide. It’s weird, it’s an anomaly, and it just is.”

A lump of ice falls from the ceiling and bounces off the screen of the crawler. I nearly fill my pants.

“You’ve got a lot of seismic activity out

there,” says Linser over the com.

“No shit,” I reply.

Just at that moment a big one hits and the crawler slides a couple of yards to one side. I steer back central and note a huge crack dividing the icy ceiling and exposing rock a couple of metres above. Something occurs to me then and I wonder if I will get a reply that will again make me feel stupid.

“Hey, Linser.”

“Yes.”

“They’ve been here for three quarters of a million years, I make that about a

thousand conjunctions. How come I haven't seen any old damage in these tunnels?

That's a thousand earthquakes."

Again there is that long pause and I await Linser's slapdown. It does not come.

"That is an interesting question, Mr Gregory. There is no damage in the area where you are and that area is an unstable one. You must remember though that we only recently acquired the low-energy scanners and that area is the only unstable area we have mapped so far."

"Yeah. Wouldn't it have been an idea to

have mapped some of the other unstable areas before the conjunction?”

“For what purpose?” he asks.

“To find out if there’s any old damage there.”

“I’m sure such information would be of interest to a planetary geologist, but we are here for the archaeology,” he says.

He either doesn’t get it or is trying to give me the brush off.

“If there’s no damage there that will be because the damage has been repaired. Oh, by the way, you got any other crawlers in this area?”

“To answer your question: no we do not have any other crawlers in that area.”

“Then it looks like I’ve found Duren. ... Tell me, Linser, have you found any evidence, other than the tunnels and the sarcophagi, of their technology?”

“No, we have not.”

“Funny that,” I say, and get out of the crawler.

Duren is inside a large chamber that contains three sarcophagi. He has strung up lights all around and as I walk in through the round door he has his back to me. He is using a cutter to slice open a sarcophagus. There seems nothing

scientific about what he is doing. It looks like vandalism. I speak to him over private com.

“Duren,” I say.

He turns and holds the business end of the cutting unit in my direction. The disruption field only has a range of a couple of centimetres. I have no intention of getting within that range.

“You ... what are you doing out here?” he asks.

It strikes me that he does not sound particularly irrational.

“I’ve come to see what you are trying to

prove,” I say. Duren stares at me for a long moment then abruptly turns back to cutting open the sarcophagus. I move round to a position where I can better see what he is doing.

“You know, it was this place being frozen that led us astray,” he says. “First you think of cryostasis and expect the bodies to be perfect. We found decayed bodies in thick frozen brine and thought it was cryostasis gone wrong. When we found no sign of their technology we then assumed this was some kind of burial.”

“What is the truth?” I ask.

He throws back the piece of sarcophagus he has cut away and it crashes to the

floor.

“The truth? The truth is that-”

Oh isn't melodrama crap. When he is just about to fill me in on 'the truth' the biggest fucking earthquake hits. I am on a floor split by a crack a half a metre wide. A haze of broken ice fills the air and huge chunks fall from the ceiling. I hear Duren yelling over the com but can not make out what he was saying. Something heavy bounces off the helmet of my suit and I realised that I might not actually get out of this alive. I bury my head under my arms and wish I had enough belief in something to pray to it. When the quake is over, some eight minutes later, Duren grabs my arm and

hauls me to my feet.

“We’ll do better in the crawlers,” he says.

We are in the crawlers when the next quake hits, and the one after that. My crawler ends up on its side with one tread smashed with the ice all around. I don’t get out of it until Duren comes and raps on the screen.

“Is that it?” I ask, as I climb out the only door I can get through. Duren shrugs. “Might be a few more aftershocks, but that’s the worst of it I think,” he says.

I study my surroundings. The tunnel is wrecked: the floor is a metre deep in

shattered ice, and rock is exposed in many places. I follow Duren into the chamber.

“I didn’t need to do it,” he says, and points.

The sarcophagus next to the one he had cut open has a huge dent in it where a boulder has fallen from the ceiling. There is also a split where the dent is deepest.

“They’re not particularly strong and yet we’ve never found a broken one, just as we’ve never found a tunnel as badly damaged as that one,” he says, gesturing towards the tunnel.

“And what does that mean?” I ask, not sure I want to know the answer.

“This is a cold world and here we make things out of frozen water. It never occurred to us that those who lived here would do the same. Frozen, salty water filled with all kinds of impurities. We should have looked closer at those impurities,” he says.

“You’re not exactly making yourself clear,” I say.

He gestures all around us at the shattered ice.

“Here is their technology. Here is the world in which they lived and will live

when they have the energy.”

“What energy?” I ask.

“Geothermal,” he replies, as if it obvious.

I only start to get it when the ice melts.

In some way the energy is distributed through the ice very evenly. One minute we are surrounded by shattered ice, the next minute we are up to our waists in water that has an almost glutinous consistency.

“Here they come,” says Duren while I wonder if I am going to drown on this insane world. It takes me a moment to

digest what he has said. I turn to the door and see one of the aliens standing there up to its crotch in the water. Standing, it looks like an insectile man with a horse's skull for a head. I have never been this scared.

“What ... what's happening?” I ask.

“The repair teams are about their work,” he says.

“I thought you said they were dead,” I say, and though wondering why I am whispering, am unable to stop myself.

“I never said such a thing. I may have misled you, but I never said they were dead.”

I feel like hitting him, but I don't dare move. A second alien comes in through the entrance. Both almond-shaped heads turned towards us. I know that if they came at us I will almost certainly shit my pants.

“But they were decayed,” I say.

“It takes energy to prevent decay. Decay is one form of entropy. With little energy to spare you don't squander it. If you have the technology you reverse entropy when you do have the energy. ... You know, it's easier to store information than to store bodies.”

The two aliens finish studying us then abruptly wade to the sarcophagi. One of

them picks up the piece of metal that Duren had cut away and pushes it back into place.

“You’re still not making yourself clear,” I say.

Duren turns his head towards me and I can see his expression. He looks as frightened as I feel, though it doesn’t come over in his oh so correct voice.

“If I wanted to preserve you over a long period of time I would record your thought patterns to crystal and keep a spit of your genetic material to regrow your body. That’s all I’d need.”

The aliens step back and trail their

strange appendages in the glutinous water. That water rises up in a glistening wave over the sarcophagi. Through it I can see the damage spontaneously repairing.

Duren goes on, “I don’t know how they did it. Their technology is in the water, mostly. I think there is something here of both burial and preservation. They don’t need entire bodies for resurrection. Maybe they’ve kept them so they can repair them from the DNA template, maybe that would use less energy.”

“If it’s in the water, what are the sarcophagi for?” I ask.

“The technology is in the water; self-

repairing, regenerating. What they are, their minds and perhaps the DNA templates, are in the sarcophagi. We spent too much time studying the contents of the containers when we should have been studying everything but the contents of the containers.”

The water recedes from the sarcophagi and they are both whole and undamaged. It then proceeds to crawl up the walls and across the ceiling. The two aliens turn and observe us, or so it seems. They have no eyes.

“What now?” I ask Duren.

“I have no idea,” the scientist replies.

I see that the water on the floor, on the walls, and on the ceiling is dividing into liquid bricks - reforming to how it was before the earthquake. I point this out to Duren.

“Just enough geothermal energy from the quakes to repair the damage they made. Neat,” he says.

One of the aliens squats and places its appendage in the water again. A snake of water, like a rivulet in reverse, traverses Duren's body. It seems to be probing all round his coldsuit. When it tries to get into his mask he slaps at it and it drops away, suddenly only water again. The aliens tilt their heads then abruptly stride to the entrance through ankle-deep water

holding the shape of bricks. We follow. We follow them out into the tunnel and there see that the treads have melted away on both of the crawlers. We follow them through the water to a point where the water is suddenly ice again - a neat line round the circumference of the tunnel. We watch them climb back into their own sarcophagi - the water still liquid inside - and seal themselves in.

“They didn’t do anything,” I say.

“They wanted to,” said Duren, “but they probably didn’t have the energy to spare.”

As we walk back to the crawlers I ask him what will happen now that this is

known.

“The project won’t be shut down by accountants. We’ll get funding from Earth Central itself. Maybe, sometime, well resurrect them all,” he says.

“It would be nice to see,” I say, after we have made a call for help from the transmitter of my crawler. And I wonder if we will see it, because, of course, the warming of our coldsuits has damaged them, and they are already starting to malfunction. Perhaps you, who are experiencing this documentary, will see.

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