

Ice World

By Michele Dutcher

"What's the next star system, Saltz?" asked the Captain to his helmsman.

"17XE23. I hate these check-up missions," answered the tall, veiny, male, his angst barely hidden below his respect for the commander. "I just always wish that we'll find a product of a seeding mission that is prospering."

"You know the directive – seed what seems to be an up-and-coming planet, leave it for a few million of their years, then slip back through the portal to see what happened. Non-interference, you know. Let civilizations develop as they will." The commander looked out through the transparent sides of their bubble of a star-ship, to see a star-system racing towards them. "Which planet was it?"

"Fourth one from the star, sir," reported the onboard ship historian, leaning forward a little towards his holographic console, to get a better view of the system's chart and historical information.

The bubble-ship flew through a spherical cloud of stardust and debris; past orbiting balls of rock and ice; on past giant balls of swirling gases

"There it is sir. Fourth planet from the star..." Saltz's voice trailed off a little as he listened to the ship's detectors. Silence, silence – eventually only a sigh. "I'm sorry, but it looks like another dud, Captain."

The historian began to expound upon facts and calculations now. "The loss of life was probably due to the loss of the planet's molten core. We've been seeing this a lot. The core goes down, the planet loses its magnetic shields, the star's radiation blows away what atmosphere the planet had." He sat back in his seat with a sigh, as the lifeless, red sphere below him slowly rotated on its axis.

"Maybe they moved inward," ventured the Captain with a shrug. "Saltz - any artificial energy readings coming from the third planet?"

The helmsman refocused his search. "I may have something. It's very faint – but probably worth a look."

"That's what we're here for," said the commander as the bubble began to speed towards the next planet in. "Description of overall planetary environment?"

A lavender colored female, a little thicker than the others, brought up equations before summarizing. "There are three land masses separating liquid water. The entire planet seems to be buried beneath a thick layer of ice."

The historian piped up, beginning to get excited. "That's probably why your reading is so slight, Saltz – the signal may be coming from a source beneath the ice – perhaps within the water."

Within ten minutes the galaxy travelling bubble was heat-blasting its way through the frozen cover. Suddenly a plume of steam rose up, encircling the ship as liquid water turned to gas. "Moving towards signal," said Saltz as the orb shot downwards, into the depths. As they descended, odd lifeforms floated past, all being recorded by the historian.

"Could we take in some of these for observation?" asked the historian.

"Let's keep on track for now," answered the Captain. "I want to see what's making that artificial signal. The finding of intelligent life is our primary directive. We can always come back to this."

They were hovering now, the alien bubble floating over six metallic tubes, all of them partially covered with eons of silt from the ocean bottom. "The signal is very clear now, Captain. In one moment, we'll have the translation. It seems to be a loop."

The crew waited silently until a mechanized voice began the translation. "To whoever finds this signal – know that we have been waiting for you. We hope these tubes will not be caskets, but rather sarcophaguses – a mechanism of bringing us or our DNA descendents back to life...To whoever finds this signal – know..." The translator shut off.

"That must be the total of the loop," ventured the historian.

"Is there anything within those tubes able to be re-animated, Merly?" asked the commander turning towards the female.

A moment passed and then, "Nothing, Captain. The time has just been too long. There's just dust left by now."

The historian's shoulders sagged a little now. "I guess we could take back one of the tubes as an artifact. I just wish there would have been someone left."

Suddenly there was a small voice coming over the translator. "Have you come to visit the grave-tubes of the surface dwellers?" it asked quietly.

All on board came to attention. "Yes – yes we have!" answered the Captain, stumbling over his words.

"These surface dwellers had always hoped someone would come. It is good to know you finally came back."

The historian could not help but jump in. "How do you know we have been here before?"

By now, outside the star-bubble, there were thousands of soft lights, as if someone had walked into their backyard on a summer's night to watch fireflies pour down from the hills. "We have always been here, in the deepest depths, watching, far away from the surface dwellers and the devastation they wrecked upon themselves. We are as much children of the molten core beneath us as they were the children of stardust."

"Would you like to come with us, into the heavens?" rushed the historian, overwhelmed. "We could build an environ for some of you aboard our ship."

There was a moment of quiet as a wave of light went through those assembled outside, and then the light washed back towards the starship. "We are content to remain where we have always been."

"Then we'll eventually go on our way without you," said the Captain. "But we'd like to stay for a while and document your world and your culture."

"As you wish." There was silence now, as though the two cultures were resting in the knowledge they were no longer alone. "We have only one request: after you leave, don't wait so long to come back."

Both groups smiled.

The End