

## **The Vacuum of Infinity**

By Flynn Connolly Sifton

Small metal claws picked up a small black rock. Twin photoreceptors lenses gazed at it curiously. The three-fingered, jointed claw tested the little rock's strength then dropped it back onto the lava flow's bank.

The thing examining the rock was a small, semi-intelligent probe, with three tiny arms, kept aloft by lightweight metal canisters containing ultralight gases. Its rounded body was covered in wires and fans. At the end of a flexible adamantium cord was a small silver sphere with twin cameras. It was one of a group of seven of its kind, launched from Earth several years earlier. This one was called XI 1500.

XI 1500 drifted slowly over the barren surface of Venus, cameras keen despite the rippling heat wave from the temperature of 464°C. The probe gave a mechanical chitter. The heat was too strong. It crippled XI's internal mechanisms, scorching its body.

The probe had survived on the volcano-ridden world of Venus for years beneath a moonless carbon dioxide sky, but now it was overcome.

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Another similar probe drifted through the atmosphere of the enormous planet Jupiter. An animatronic claw reached out and grabbed a small diamond. Internal fans whirred. The diamond was examined then released.

The probe, NN 9999, felt a strange tug. It projected holographic maps that revealed its location at the edge of the Great Red Spot. If NN could have screamed, it would have. It was sucked into incredibly strong winds, doomed to be torn apart by the gaseous form of the largest planet.

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Yet another probe lay in pieces on the barren surface of the smallest planet, Mercury, spending the days nearly melting and the nights freezing. It had crashed trying to land on the planet closest to the sun. Another mechanical explorer had suffered the same fate on the mountainous landscape of Mars; ruins of a probe, forever on an icy desert world. Crushed between two asteroids in the beautiful rings of the gas planet Saturn was another destroyed probe. Its ruins would forever drift through rocks and ice of the rings, watched coldly by sixty-two moons.

But none of these probes had suffered the worst fate. All found their destinations. All found some shred of information before their premature demise. All had some resting place, however isolated and uncaring.

Two of the doomed probes had not been so lucky, if such a fate could be called luck. They had suffered a far worse fate.

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They rocketed on into uncaring oblivion. Forever entwined, forever helpless, the final two probes. The ones whose discoveries had been most anticipated. The ones who had, in some cruel trick of destiny, been fated to an eternal doom.

The two probes meant to go to Uranus, the sideways planet, and Neptune, named for the god of the sea, had collided. Some thruster malfunction on the part of one or both had sealed their fate. But, upon their collision, neither had been destroyed, or damaged enough to be worthless. They had become forever stuck, mechanical appendages permanently tangled and thrust into each other's bodies. They could no longer control the direction they travelled.

Years had passed and they had whirled beyond the blue gas planets, crooked Uranus and windy Neptune. They could not stop or run out of fuel, for they had been designed to collect energy from the void of space that they travelled through.

They went on and on, passed the Kuiper belt, beyond the furthest reaches of the solar system. This punishment, this undeserved journey, would never end. They would not stop. They would not die. They would drift through this void forever, just one more speck in the vacuum of infinity.

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