

Life on Earth

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A sleek elliptical shell slips through the cloud of frozen asteroids. Light from the star ahead slides off its iridescent casing and something long dormant within it wakes. The space before it is observed in every wavelength across the spectrum from gamma, X and ultra-violet through the narrow band of visible light and on into the longest radio waves. A few of those waves now wash upon the shores of other worlds. A picture emerges within its autonomous mind of four large planets and four small. Curious, the explorer accelerates towards them.

The nearest two are ice giants, perfect opalescent pearls of aquamarine. The first one swathed in speeding clouds, the second serene, encircled by dark bands that ripple gently in the starlight.

Next the gas giants. Spectacular rings around the third planet are echoed in the circles of cloud which race, pushing past each other, vibrating so violently they spiral towards the pole in a bizarre rotating hexagon of storm. The fourth and largest body in the system is wrapped in alternating whorls of ammonia crystals, agitated by an angry red cyclone which glares at the intruder as it passes.

The fifth planet is almost missed. A small spent rock of dust and rust, yet it reveals a surprising past. Dry sea beds, parched river valleys and a thin crust of polar ice all hint at the possibility for life, long ago, perhaps when this explorer was setting out on its odyssey. Is it too late? Has life come and gone in the time it took to reach this sun?

The explorer slows until it finds the sixth planet. Not barren like the fifth, nor bloated like the others. Pure white clouds spiral and dance, parting over deep blue seas. Perfect? No. The seas surround islands of bleached sand and charred rocks. The imprints of great forests which once flourished and thrummed with creatures. And there, most melancholy of all, just beneath the waters which lap these barren lands are the shadows of great avenues and shattered shards, surely made not grown. Looking closer the explorer traces faint lines extending out from these dead places, a web criss-crossing the shallow seabed and extending out across the dry lands. At every crossing is another shadow, another hint at the creativeness of the beings who once thrived there.

The explorer orbits slowly. Sadly. So near and yet so far. Perhaps only centuries late after its epic journey of millennia.

But wait. Look there, a silvery scaled creature slithers from the waves and lies upon a rock, gasping and wide-eyed. Beside it an insect wanders, unaware. With the flick of a tongue the insect is gone and another circle of life has already begun.