

Imaginary Journeys

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PROGRAM NOTES

There are places that exist that, while we have considerable knowledge and even greater curiosity about them, are impossible to visit. Planets, stars, and galaxies which we are able to observe in greater detail with each passing year lie at such great distances from us that even if we had the technology and supplies to reach them, we still could not get to them within our own lifetime without breaking what are presently understood as basic laws of physics.

This, of course, is where imagination must take over in so many of the great stories and films that have been created about interstellar travel. The music of "Imaginary Journeys" aims in a similar way to take us to such places.

1. Launch and an Unexpected Early Encounter

Our ship lifted off from Earth with great strength and anticipation of the yet unseen destinations ahead. As we broke through the cloud deck the sky quickly faded from blue to the speckled black of outer space. After the initial novelty of extra-terrestrial travel (and some dizzying acceleration) we became aware of the amazing view of the stars. They lit up as few have ever seen them, familiar to us yet strangely beautiful, so much more brilliant and numerous than we'd ever experienced them before.

Our craft quickly passed the moon visible to the port side and headed into human-unexplored space. It seemed only a short time after that we encountered Mars, the red planet. Now traveling at truly unprecedented speed we soon successfully navigated the asteroid belt, rapidly approaching the outer giant planets. While Jupiter was not in line with our position at that time Saturn was, with her amazing rings. We crossed within observable distance of the odd greenish-blue hues of Uranus and Neptune, now a bit less visible in the diminishing sunlight. Poor Pluto, no longer a member of the distinguished planets, was just too far to be seen.

Before exiting the solar system, however, we had to deal with the Oort Cloud, a huge expanse of asteroid-like objects millions of miles wide. This treacherous part of the journey took us into a very dark place, risking collision and unforeseen gravitational forces. Through a rather lengthy struggle and some clever maneuvering we made it out with our vehicle intact. Having survived that encounter we managed to escape the sun's last pull and the solar system, delving into the realm of deep space still at increasing speed.

As we looked back at the shrinking sun, our physical source of life, and her planets we also looked beyond, anticipating with true wonder what lay ahead of us.

2. The Omega Centauri Star Cluster

Three years, eight months and 18 days... A long time to be asleep. Maybe that's why I felt like I just couldn't wake up. As the mental fog slowly lifted I began to make sense of my situation: deep space travel to such a remote location, even exceeding the speed of light, took considerable time and the deep narcosis had spared us a long wait. We had arrived!

Our spacecraft slowed and began its final descent to the recently discovered Vespucci, a near earth-sized planet picked up only a few years ago in an exo-planet scan of one of the more prominent stars in the cluster. It was now coming back to me: this was the rare opportunity to witness a world illuminated not by one but by many - hundreds - of suns.

As we entered Vespucci's atmosphere and descended below the thin cloud deck her beauty came ever clearer into view. It was evening (at least relative to our nearest, gravitational sun) and the sky was showing not just beautiful clear twilight hues of blue, orange and purple among a few sparse clouds, but the darkening night began to show her own spotted colors: red, yellow, white and blue as well. It was an extraordinary sight.

As the ship landed and we sat still in our new world I was taking in the entire scene, still quite visible at night: the terrain that was rocky but not too severe, the sparse plant life and the sky. It appeared there were some tall mountains in the distance toward the left and a large plain (maybe a sea) over to the far right. Several creatures about the size of a rabbit scampered a few meters from our starboard bow. The brilliant starlit sky with just a few scattered clouds illuminated the landscape with a rich array of color that seemed to challenge the eye's ability to even take it all in.

The illumination was, in fact, sufficient for us to schedule a prompt EVA. Like those first moon explorers so many years ago we yearned to take a look at this strange new world we had risked so much to visit. And it was riskier than we had even previously thought. Our telescopes back in Earth orbit had given us some amazing perceptions about Vespucci: her

size, proximity to her sun, surface temperature, and her somewhat earth-like atmosphere. While the temperature was off just a bit (5 degrees C. instead of the projected 35 degrees) all the other intel had proven to be accurate.

Unfortunately her erratic seismic activity had escaped our radar. There was no indication of this even upon our approach. Our first walk ventured only about one hundred meters from the craft but after some time passed (several minutes, maybe longer?) our instruments began to pick up low intermittent rumbles. Our visit may be cut short....

3. A Planet's Demise and A Narrow Escape

More thorough scans of the planet's surface and below by our crew still on board (possible now that we were in physical contact with the surface) revealed seismic activity our instruments hadn't picked up on before. After only minutes we had to immediately abort the EVA. Seconds after turning back toward the ship one of our officers spotted an avalanche on one of the distant hills. Vespucci began literally to convulse as we boarded. Our very lives in danger, aborting was still a reluctant decision having come so far. (Could we maybe leave the surface until the disturbance subsided?) In the terrestrial crescendo it soon became clear - now painfully obvious - that full mission abort was the only survivable option.

As we took our posts aboard the ship and completed the ignition sequence we spotted two lava flows only several hundred meters away and had to move quickly. Our craft lifted off not a moment too soon, in grave danger as molten rock and ash began to fly in every direction. Several molten projectiles hurled toward us, one of them striking the aft starboard engine. Our pilots were able to think quickly and compensate for the uneven thrust as we left the surface but we still could not break away quickly enough. The planet's fluctuating gravitational pull was now wreaking havoc with our navigational systems and we had all to do to reach escape velocity - moving in the proper direction, UP and AWAY from the planet - and get our craft out into space where we would be safe from the chaos.

Engines at maximum thrust we at last hurtled away from Vespucci, enduring the paradox of disappointment at an early end to our discovery and gratitude toward God that we had all escaped with our lives and our ship.

Silently accelerating through space toward our next destination, Koziółki 20.5.17, a binary star system at the edge of the Cluster, we breathed a heavy sigh of relief. While none of our experiences had yet to equal the brief but incredible view from Vespucci's unforgiving landscape, we knew that in time more incredible discoveries lay ahead for us....