

Vacation Trip

Actmid had been anxious to go on this trip to the Capital for a long time. He had so looked forward to being able to take his kids to see all the sights. Of course over the last few days they had seen many of the traditional historical places such as monuments, tombs, and important historical buildings, but this day was the high point of the trip to Actmid. They were going to be spending the day at the Air and Space Museum.

Of course Actmid had been something of an air and space junkie forever. He read everything he could get a hold of, and watched all kinds of air and space documentaries. He even suspected he might already know a lot about every aircraft and spacecraft on display in the museum, but still, seeing them in person had been something he had wanted for a very long time.

“Dad, how soon are we going to be there?” Actmid’s son Hofur asked.

“Soon, very soon. It’s just right over there. See that building?” Actmid pointed to a building they were approaching in their cab.

“Yeah!” Hofur exclaimed only to be poked by his brother Jarah when he wasn’t looking. “Stop that!”

“Got you.” Jarah taunted.

“Both of you just stop or we won’t be going in to see anything.” Actmid threatened.

“OK we promise,” the boys responded in two part harmony. They were good kids at heart and Actmid loved both of them more than life itself.

“Just remember what I said,” Actmid reinforced as the cab pulled to a stop at the museum.

“That’ll be twenty two fifty,” the driver announced while looking back to Actmid.

Actmid fumbled the money out of his pocket and handed it to the driver as the boys were already getting out of the cab. “Here’s thirty. You can keep the change.”

“Thanks. Have a good time,” the driver said automatically as he was already starting to pull away.

“Come on Dad, come on!” Jarah was urging his father to catch up, but Actmid truly needed no urging because he was more anxious to see the displays than either of his kids.

Once inside Actmid’s breath was almost literally taken away. It was even more beautiful than he had imagined. His eyes darted all around the expanse and his heart raced as he just wanted to go everywhere at once. Finally he forced himself to look at the brochure that explained the layout of the museum and showed them where they would find the different displays.

“OK kids. How about we start with some of the older stuff first?”

“OK, OK, which way, let’s just get going.” Jarah was the first to pipe up.

“That way then,” Actmid pointed and they started making their way to the displays of the early days of flight.

Actmid enjoyed the look on his son’s faces as they examined some of the early aircraft. They were literally astounded that some of these creations actually flew and so was Actmid. Those early pioneers were even braver than he had imagined.

Then they moved on to the aircraft used in the various wars around the world. Jarah and Hofur pretended to shoot at each other from their respective aircraft as they circled some of the displays. Actmid remembered what it was like to be their age and restrained them only when necessary. He certainly didn’t want any of the other patrons of the museum to be mortally wounded by a stray bullet or stray aircraft.

When they got to the displays of the early days of space flight the boys and Actmid were really in their element. Actmid remembered making a scrap book from news articles that talked about some of the early space flights. He remembered watching the news during some of the early launches and the returns from space. Every time they launched Actmid used to tell himself that maybe someday he would also be able to go into space. It had all seemed so near at the time. No one thought that almost half a lifetime later space would still be so far away for all but a privileged few.

There were displays of space suits from the early days too. “How in the world do you get into that?” Jarah asked, pointing at one of the earliest suits.

“Beats me,” Actmid responded. Then he spotted the button for the presentation about the display. “Maybe they’ll show us,” he said while punching the button.

Thankfully they were indeed presented with not only a description of the suit in great detail but also a demonstration of exactly what was required to get into it. Of course one could never have managed to get into it alone. It actually took several to successfully negotiate the feat. Seeing this gave Actmid even a greater appreciation for how difficult the early space flights were. He also appreciated how much it must have taken to strap into one of those early spacecraft that weren’t much bigger than an oversized trash container.

Actmid daydreamed that he was in one of those space suits and strapped into one of the early orbital craft. He felt himself sitting on top of all that fuel and the engines that would lift everything into orbit. He pictured the count down in his mind as he closed his eyes. He could hear the engines starting with a tremendous roar and they were shaking with a vibration so bad that it would blur your vision. He felt the pressure of being pushed back into his seat as the liftoff acceleration began. He could just barely hear in his earphones that he had cleared the launch platform. He was on his way.

“Dad. Dad! Come on!” Hofur and Jarah were calling from the next display.

“OK, I’m coming.” Actmid wondered if he would ever have that experience for real or would politics forever make space something that lingered just out of reach for those like him?

“Look, it’s part of the space station!” Hofur exclaimed.

“Sure enough. Wow, isn’t that something?” Actmid was impressed. He had seen the pictures, but in person it was almost overwhelming.

“Can we go in, can we go in?” Jarah was jumping up and down.

“No, you aren’t allowed to go in,” Actmid answered. He realized this was just one small module, but all the same it was astonishing. “Let’s just see what it says,” Actmid pushed the display button.

The display told them how the station was a joint effort of various governments all around the world. It showed them each of the major pieces and the places where they were manufactured. The display also told about the difficulties that had to be overcome to get everything to work together and what a tremendous engineering effort was required. Several of the launches that were performed during the construction of the station were also shown along with some of the orbital assembly operations.

Actmid found himself drifting into that dream world where he too was working in orbit and maneuvering a new module into position. He felt its lack of weight but tremendous inertia as he pushed the assembly into position. He struggled against the resistance of his gloves to his every movement while locking the assembly into position. The view was breath taking as he caught sight of the cloud tops passing by below.

“Da’ud!” Hofur whined.

“Coming.” Actmid was shaken from his day dream by the boys urging him on to the next display. It was alright though because he was as anxious as anyone to see this last major display.

This was the display he had waited a lifetime to see. This was the artifact. Well, actually it was a copy of the artifact. The original was both too important and too delicate to place on display in public. Yet there it was, even if only a copy. This was the alien space probe that had been captured as it was swinging through their system.

“Wow!” was all Actmid could say at first as he just stood there and stared.

“What’s this, what’s this?” Jarah was pointing and demanding attention.

“Just a minute, Jarah. I want to just look a little. Be patient.” For so long they had wondered if there was life anywhere else in space. Of course the odds favored life elsewhere, but here was finally the real proof of an advanced civilization among the stars.

Actmid looked carefully at the artifact and also was entranced by the other portions of the display. All around the artifact were various presentations of information that had come from it. The builders had thought ahead to the day that someone somewhere might find it and they had provided a wealth of information about themselves. Of course decoding the information was not without its problems, but one at a time each had been solved.

If the scientists were right the probe had been in space forty thousand years or perhaps even longer. The probe gave them information about the likely location of its builders and an astronomical survey of the area had located an unremarkable star at the designated location. Of course all the radio telescopes had been trained on this location for years now yet no sign of any transmissions had ever been detected. There was always a lot of speculation about what may have happened to the builders over those tens of thousands of years since they had launched this intrepid little craft. One could only hope that things had gone well for them.

There were pictures of the aliens and pictures that were apparently scenes from their home world. The display explained how the pictures and other information were obtained from the probe but Actmid didn’t fully follow the explanation. Instead, he focused on the fact that the aliens themselves were rather ugly. Still, Actmid tried to picture himself meeting one of them in person. He wanted to think he would have been able to stifle the combination of fear and revulsion that he might feel in their presence. This made him wonder what they would have thought of him in turn.

“Dad! Da’ud!” Hofur now complained.

“Just a minute.” Actmid stalled. He was listening to what the scientist said were greetings in the various languages of the aliens. They all sounded so strange to Actmid and the possibility that these sounds actually meant something in a language surprised him. Could we have ever managed to be able to talk with them? He wondered.

After the greetings came a number of musical selections. At least the display called it music. Actmid wasn’t terribly impressed. He supposed that musical tastes didn’t translate well between alien species. While listening he tried to imagine what bizarre instruments could have been compelled to make such noises.

Actmid wondered what it must have been like to be these aliens. Did they have families? Were they born, or did they just divide? Did they have governments on their planet that lead them into major wars? How long had it taken them to get into space? Where had they traveled? Were they still around somewhere or had their civilization perished while the probe was crossing through space? What were their everyday lives like?

“Da’ud!” Jarah whined.

“Hold on.” Actmid wondered if alien children whined. Perhaps whining was a universal

constant that developed among all sentient species. But did they love? Certainly they must have been curious or they would never have sent this probe out to the stars. Did they know where they were sending it? Was it here for a reason, or was this all some colossal accident?

“Come on Da’ud, what’s it say? What’s it say?” Jarah demanded.

“Just a second.” Actmid knew he had just about run out of stalling answers, but he wanted to just stand there a moment and imagine being the aliens. He looked at the pictures and wondered what it must have been like to visit those places. He listened to the greetings and tried to imagine speaking those languages. Then he tried to imagine being at the small dot in the astronomical photographs and peering back here towards his home and wondering, as they might have, whether there was other life out there.

“Da’ud!” again Hofur took up the banner.

“OK, OK, what?”

“There. That. What’s it say? What’s it say?” Hofur pointed at the sign on the side of the probe.

“Oh, that.”

“Yeah, that. What’s it say?”

Actmid thought back to what he had read about the probe. “I remember reading that it says Voyager,” he said as Hofur finally lowered his desperately pointing tentacle and Actmid once again began reading part of the display with his third eye.