

# **VOYAGER 1**

## THE HOMECOMING

GREG KROJAC

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*“We don’t even know how strong we are until we are forced to bring that hidden strength forward. In times of tragedy, of war, of necessity, people do amazing things. The human capacity for survival and renewal is awesome.”*

**Isabel Allende (Chilean writer)**

# DAY ONE

24 April – Infected 0 Dead 0

The crew of the F/V Alaskan Mermaid was looking forward to a well-earned rest from the arduous work of trawling in the icy waters of the Bering Sea. The Pollock A season was almost officially over. Like most of the other factory trawlers, the Alaskan Mermaid would normally have already returned home before the season's end, allowing the crew to take a welcome early break and spend quality time with their families but destiny had played a cruel card, forcing the freezer trawler to stay out at sea longer than anticipated. A major failure in the factory freezer equipment, had allowed its refrigerant to be partially released into the engine room. A similar thing had happened to another trawler the previous season, but with far more calamitous consequences — the stricken trawler had developed a list due to an accumulation of seawater on the starboard side, the order to abandon ship had been given and, less than half an hour later, the ship had downflooded and slipped beneath the waves. Valuable lessons had been learned from that incident, allowing prompt action by the crew of the Alaskan Mermaid to minimize the damage, and avoid the same fate. The result was only a few days' loss of fishing while essential repairs were made and the ship was soon up and running again.

Seabirds swarmed above the cold waters, each one peering downward with beady eyes, ready to pounce upon any gift that the sea was teased into giving up. Suddenly the icy waters erupted and the birds became even more agitated. The water swelled around the center of the disturbance as a net broached its surface, a heaving mass of fish pulsating against the nylon netting from within, as the catch gradually made its way towards the stern of the fishing boat. After a couple of minutes, the rest of the net surfaced, an industrial-strength fishnet stocking, whose foot section was crammed with aquatic booty. A heavy-duty winch hauled the trawl closer and closer to the waiting crewmen, A few birds pecked at the extremities of any fish that poked out between the netting, but most of the gulls soon dispersed and took advantage of the myriad of other fish that had been brought to the surface by the turbulence.

It was a good catch, the trawl filled to bursting point with thousands of squirming rusty pink fish. As it got ever closer to the trawler, the net flattened out and some of the fish made a break for freedom. But there was nowhere safe to swim to, and the fleeing fugitives were easily picked off by the aerial scavengers. For those trapped within the trawler net, their fate was sealed and they would surely end up on somebody's dinner table.

As the sea surrendered its grip on the teeming treasure, the netting began to accelerate towards its destination. The pulley creaked a little under the weight of the day's haul, as the struggle to reel in the day's catch began in earnest. The ship's captain stood on the bridge, watching the booty as it glistened in the morning sun, pleased with what he saw. They would soon be able to head back to port and see their families again — that's what kept them all going. Trawling for Pollock was a hard life and everybody on board was eager to go home.

Suddenly the trawler's skipper spotted something unusual in the nets, something that had no business being there. He leaned into his microphone and bellowed an order which resounded around the ship.

"Stop the winch!"

The crew couldn't see why the command had been given, but they knew that their captain must have a good reason. The winch shuddered to a halt, complaining briefly at the unexpected interruption. The captain barked another order.

"Cut engines."

The ship fell silent, or at least as silent as is possible for a working factory ship. The deck crew, now with nothing to do for the moment, crowded at the stern of the ship and stared at the now stilled net, the fish within still thrashing about trying to escape. The captain ordered the ship's engines to restart, and the vessel edged forward as slowly as possible, so that the trawl net wouldn't sink back underwater. He passed his binoculars to his first mate, who was at his side.

"Take a look, Robert, and tell me what you see."

The officer put the binoculars to his eyes and changed the focus so that he could see better what had caused the net retrieval to be paused.

"It looks like a satellite dish, Skip, but I think it's too big for that. And what the hell would a satellite dish be doing out here in the middle of the Bering Sea, anyway?"

"Take another look, Robert."

The first mate refocused the binoculars.

"No, Scrub that. It's not a satellite dish. I think it may be a satellite."

The captain had been mulling silently through his options while watching the object bob up and down in the water.

"Agreed. But if it is a satellite, whose is it? It may be one of ours. maybe it isn't. But we definitely can't deal with it ourselves. As much as I'd love to claim it as salvage, the authorities will want to know what we've found. But — on the bright side — I wouldn't be surprised if there's a finder's fee. I'll get on the sat-phone to the Coastguard straightaway. They'll know what to do."

Robert grinned.

"Let's hope it's not the satellite we need to make that call."

The call was made and then the two of them descended the steps from the bridge to the ship's deck. Robert called to two of the crewmen.

"Fancy a swim?"

The men were grateful for a chance to get in the water. Normally their job was to make underwater repairs or release a snagged trawl but it would be good to do something different. It wasn't every day that a satellite got caught in a trawler's nets, and they wanted to get a better look at the day's celebrity.

Five minutes later, all kitted up in their scuba-diving gear, they plunged into the water and headed to the part of the net where the object was trapped. Each had with them a length of rope which they used to further constrain the object, just in case the sea had any thoughts of dragging it back down below. Then they checked the area around the satellite and dived underwater to see what was happening beneath the netting. After a few seconds, they

resurfaced and gave a thumbs up to the captain, who looked visibly relieved. The satellite — and the windfall that it hopefully represented — wasn't going anywhere.

“Robert, tell the divers to attach a buoy to it and then come back on board. We can't afford to lose it.”

An hour or so later, the chud-chud-chud of helicopter blades could be heard in the distance. The sound got louder as the chopper approached the ship until it was close enough to drop three divers into the water near the net. The entire crew was now on deck watching the adventure unfold, and at least two dozen cell phones were pointed at the scene, recording the event for both posterity and social media.

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Sitara Khan, with the typical extreme beauty and lighter complexion of her Pathan heritage, and whose large dark eyes looked as if they had been drawn by a Disney artist, had been given no chance to prepare for this assignment. No sooner had she received an official phone call, than a car had pulled up outside her aunt's house in Anchorage, and whisked her away to a waiting helicopter at the nearby Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson. She was enjoying her break from her work as a member of the Voyager Team at the Jet Propulsion Labs at Caltech, but the NASA Deputy Administrator's Personal Assistant had called her personally, so she could hardly refuse. She grabbed a few clothes, stuffed them into a backpack, and called out to her aunt.

“I have to go out for a while. Don't worry if I'm not back tonight — I have to do something for work. I expect I'll be back tomorrow.”

Her aunt didn't worry too much. She knew her niece was a sensible girl, with an important job. Sitara wasn't a typical Muslim woman — a child of the 90s, she had missed the time of the dictatorship back in Pakistan and had been allowed certain freedoms of thought and choice, and she'd been able to follow her dream of a career in science. Her inspiration was Muslim astronaut Anousheh Ansari, who'd spent time on the International Space Station back in 2006. Science wasn't necessarily the career path that her family would have chosen for her — they'd have loved for her to be a doctor or lawyer — but Sitara had been adamant that she wanted to break the stereotype and work for NASA so her parents had given her their blessing and sent her to study at MIT in Cambridge, Massachusetts. At any other university, she would have probably graduated *Cum Laude*, but she'd set her heart on MIT so missing out on that particular honor was a small sacrifice to pay. Her parents were very proud of their daughter.

Sitara knew that something big was going on as soon as she was ushered towards a US Navy helicopter. She climbed aboard and the chopper immediately took off. As she watched the Alaskan coast fade into the distance behind her, she wondered where she was being taken to.

A part of the Mission Control team, her job was to send instructions to and receive data from a space probe that was out in interstellar space, 13 billion miles from Earth, and moving further away at a rate of 1 million miles a day.

A scuba-diving course taken on her days off from the Pasadena-based JPL offices back in California was about to pay dividends.

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She plunged into the icy waters of the Bering Sea, flanked by two Navy frogmen whose primary duty was to keep her safe. One of the frogmen cut away a portion of the netting, just enough to provide easier access to the object, and dozens of fish upon suddenly seeing an opportunity for freedom poured out of their nylon cage.

Swimming closer to the tethered object, she scanned its surface, looking for anything that could help her identify it. If she didn't know better she'd have said that she was looking at a space probe, but that was patently ridiculous, so she pushed such thoughts to the back of her mind. It had to be a satellite — she just needed to discover where it was from.

Looking at the dish, she saw what appeared to be a High Gain Antenna along with a Subreflector Support Truss and Subreflector,

*I must be seeing things. It can't be.*

Logic told her that her initial suspicions must be wrong and she tossed the thoughts away into the water. She ducked beneath the waves and her waterproof flashlight lit up a ten-sided box with container bays attached to the base of what she believed to be an antenna. She opened one of the bays, expecting to see radio transmitters or various electronic subsystems and scientific instruments, but was shocked to find that it was empty. She opened the other nine compartments, only to find that they too were empty.

*This doesn't make sense. Nobody would send an empty satellite into orbit.*

She noticed several mountings on the craft with nothing attached to them. Wracking her brains, trying to think what might be missing from those supports, the answer hit her like a thunderbolt out of the blue. She *had* seen the configuration before, not first-hand admittedly, but she'd read enough technical documents and seen enough photos and illustrations that she realized that perhaps her initial diagnosis was correct. She was so busy trying to prove to herself that the object was a fallen satellite, certain in the knowledge that the alternative couldn't possibly be true, that she had momentarily abandoned her scientific impartiality.

*It can't be. That's ludicrous. Impossible.*

Two Voyager space probes had left Earth over forty years earlier on a one-way trip into space and most definitely were not supposed to be back on their home planet.

Playing Devil's Advocate, and accepting that perhaps the impossible was possible, she knew that if this were a Voyager probe, there should be an arm at the end of which were located a Low-Energy Charged Particle Detector, a Cosmic Ray Subsystem, a Plasma Subsystem, an Imaging Science Subsystem, an Ultraviolet Spectrometer, the Photopolarimeter Subsystem, and an Infrared Interferometer Spectrometer. But none of them were there.

*Am I losing my mind? The Voyager spacecraft are billions of miles away.*

She looked again. Something else had once been connected to the unit, but it hadn't broken off — it had been deliberately removed. She moved to the other side of the container housing, to what she now tentatively identified as the Bus. Other items had also been carefully removed. She knew what should have been there — an Optical Calibration Target plate, two Planetary Radio Astronomy and Plasma Wave Antennae, three Radioisotope Thermoelectric Generators, and a Magnetometer Boom.

*My bosses back at JPL will think I'm insane.*

She looked again at the main body of the Bus, desperately seeking anything that could convince her otherwise. Another missing item was conspicuous by its absence. The plinth was there but it was no longer attached to anything. What should have been there would have confirmed beyond all reasonable doubt the identity of the object.

The Golden Record was missing.

A chill ran down her spine as she realized the magnitude of what the sea had just given up. How was she going to explain to NASA that one of its Voyager space probes had miraculously come home?



# DAY TWO

25 April – Infected 60 Dead 0

The NASA conference room in Washington DC looked like many a conference room up and down the country — a horseshoe of linked desks, the open end of the arrangement providing easy visibility to two wafer-thin large-screen TV monitors hanging on a wall, a giant screen complemented by a smaller one placed centrally beneath it. To each side of the smaller TV was a framed artist's impression of each Voyager space probe as it travelled through space, Each picture was surrounded by images of the prime members of the Voyager 1 and 2 project teams.

Each desk was furnished with a computer monitor and almost all the blue executive office chairs were occupied. The people seated were of all shapes, sizes, and ethnicities, ranging from young people in their late twenties to others who were up to thirty years or so older. Two-thirds of the eighteen were male, and six were women. The majority of the men were dressed formally in shirts and ties, but a handful — the younger ones mainly — were wearing polo shirts. All those present had NASA identity cards hanging from blue cords slung around their necks.

Sitara entered the room and mouthed hello to several of the attendees as she made her way to a vacant chair in front of the main monitors and upon whose desk sat a nameplate with the word *presenter* etched in silver capital letters on a black background. She wasn't the most important person at the meeting by rank — that would be Anthony Healey, the Administrator of NASA — but, as the NASA representative at the scene of the salvage, her input would be the most valuable. The task of chairing the meeting fell to the NASA Deputy Administrator, Roger Nelson, who, along with the Administrator, and the respective Directors of JPL, the Goddard Space Flight Center (GSFC), the Langley Research Center (LRC), and the Independent Verification and Validation Facility (IVVF), was anxious to hear what Sitara had to say.

Sitara settled into her seat, spotted three other members of the Voyager 1 Project Team — the Project Manager, the Voyager Spacecraft Team Chief, and the Telecommunications and Mission Systems Manager — and gave them a nervous smile. She was a little in awe of being in the presence of so many high-ranking NASA officials at the same time but did her best to conceal it.

The Deputy Administrator rose to his feet, adjusted his suit jacket, straightened his tie, cleared his throat, and began to speak.

“Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for coming here at such short notice.”

He motioned toward Sitara.

“However, when you hear what Dr. Khan has to say, I'm sure that you will agree that it was well worth the inconvenience. So, without further ado, I would like to hand you over to Voyager Project Scientist, Dr. Sitara Khan.”

The Deputy Administrator retook his seat as Sitara stood up. She'd given presentations dozens of times since she'd joined the agency, but this particular presentation had been very

hastily prepared. Sitara pressed a key on her notebook computer and the larger of the two screens displayed a website entitled '*Voyager, The Interstellar Mission*'. To calm her nerves, she took a sip from the glass of water that had been provided for her. Her throat freshly moistened, she instantly felt more confident.

“Good morning Administrator, Deputy Administrator, ladies, and gentlemen. What I am going to say *will* seem impossible but I ask you all please to keep an open mind.”

Her audience nodded silently. She continued.

“May I first draw your attention to the main screen? You’ll see three measurements for each of the two Voyager spacecraft. Please notice, in particular, the distance of Voyager 1 from Earth, shown in both kilometers and AUs, with its distance from the Sun, and the roundtrip light time from the Earth. It’s nothing unusual. We’ve all seen these figures and watched them as they increase by the second. We’ve seen them hundreds of times. Thousands even. But I want you to be aware of them while you listen to what I have to say.

“Just over twenty-four hours ago, I was at my aunt’s house in Anchorage when I received an urgent phone call from NASA to drop everything and go investigate an unidentified object. Soon I was up to my neck in the waters of the Bering Sea, behind a fishing trawler, examining an object that had been caught in their nets”

She continued.

“I fully expected it to be sunken space debris or perhaps, at best, a fallen satellite.”

Another key press and the advancing distances were replaced by a photo of the object trapped within the trawler’s netting, the website now displayed on the smaller screen. This photo then dissolved to reveal another image of the object, sitting captive in a JPL laboratory at Pasadena. Her audience gasped as Sitara took a deep breath, knowing that she was about to say the unthinkable, that she was about to put into words what they were all thinking.

“The spacecraft we recovered from the sea is Voyager 1.”

A hush fell over the room. The assembled scientists knew what the object looked like, but Sitara had said the unutterable. She studied the confused faces that mirrored her own when she’d come to the same conclusion.

“I had my suspicions as soon as I saw the object, but they were confirmed when I began to examine the Bus at the base of the High Gain Antenna. I noticed that there were other mountings with nothing attached to them. That’s when alarm bells started ringing. I opened each of the ten compartments in turn, expecting to find electronic subsystems and instrumentation but they were empty.”

She paused for effect.

“They were all empty.”

Administrator Healey interrupted Sitara. The very thought that the vehicle in their labs being examined by their scientists could be Voyager 1 was ridiculous, but the empty compartments of the spacecraft concerned him too.

“Doctor Khan, are you saying that these compartments had been opened, the contents removed, and then resealed?”

The Administrator listened to the words as he said them, thinking how preposterous they sounded when spoken out loud. Whatever it was, the object couldn’t be Voyager 1.

“They certainly appear to have been, yes.”

“Could they not have been damaged by a collision with a foreign object wandering the Solar System?”

“Perhaps, sir. But there’s no evidence of any impact — other than expected pitting, that is. The Bus is intact. The compartments *do* seem to have been opened and resealed.”

“Could they have been interfered with here on Earth? Before we recovered the object?”

“Of course, there’s always a small chance that they were, but I don’t believe that happened. Why would anyone remove some parts and leave the others? Surely it would make more sense to take the whole spacecraft.”

Sitara knew how crazy she sounded. Voyager 1 was billions of miles away. Another murmur flowed around the room, as the audience tried to process what they were hearing. The objective of the two Voyager missions was to explore the Solar System and then seek out new horizons and possibly encounter new civilizations. Nobody wanted to say the words but everybody understood the implications of the missing parts having been removed, and not broken off. Sitara waited for the hubbub to die down.

“I knew that I was looking at Voyager 1, but I didn’t want to believe it myself. I mean, it’s crazy. Isn’t it? But several other pieces of equipment were also clearly missing, among them several Subsystems, Spectrometers, Antennae, and Thermoelectric Generators. None had been broken off; they had all been dismounted.”

The audience watched as photos of the support mountings to which the equipment had been attached zoomed into view. The removal had been deliberate. The Administrator stood up and looked around the room at the mystified audience.

“This is impossible. It can’t be Voyager 1. It must be a copy, although I can’t for the life of me think why anyone would want to dump a fake space probe into the ocean.”

He turned and pointed to the smaller screen, which was still showing the two Voyagers’ distances from the Earth. The values were still increasing.

“Look. There’s the proof. Both Voyagers are still there, traveling away from us. Voyager 1 can’t be in two places at the same time. It’s impossible. This has to be some kind of hoax. I mean, what other explanation could there possibly be?”

The Director of the IVVF offered a possible explanation.

“Perhaps we’ve suffered a cyber-attack, perhaps our network’s been hacked. Perhaps those numbers changing on the screen are false.”

The Administrator shook his head.

“No, it can’t be as simple as that. Firstly, we have one of the most robust IT security systems in the world. I hesitate to say we’re 100 percent safe but we’re as close as it’s possible to get without calling ourselves perfect. And — even if that scenario were true — it would mean that Voyager 1 has turned around and returned to Earth in a matter of a few days. Considering that it’s been traveling in the other direction for over forty years, I think we can rule that one out, don’t you?”

The Deputy Administrator interjected.

“It’s madness, I know. But our top forensic scientists have been examining the object non-stop since it arrived at the lab, and all the evidence is pointing to the object indeed being Voyager 1. The very same space probe that was launched from Cape Canaveral on September 5, 1977.”

The Administrator shook his head.

“Which it can’t be. The laws of physics don’t allow for it.”

The Administrator pointed again to the ever-increasing distances displayed on the lower screen.

“I mean. Look. It’s out there. Systems have been checked, double-checked, and triple-checked. Voyager 1 has left our Solar System and is getting further and further away from us. That’s Voyager 1 out there – what we have in our lab simply cannot be Voyager 1.”

Sitara was tempted to bite her lip, but she had to say something.

“Unless...”

The Administrator was prepared to hear any suggestion at the moment.

“Unless what, Dr. Khan? I’m open to any suggestions.”

“It sounds crazy.”

“Spit it out, Doctor. We’re looking crazy square in the eyes already. You can’t make it any worse.”

“Well, a few minutes earlier, you said that Voyager 1 can’t be in two places at the same time.”

“It can’t.”

“But what if it can? I mean, I know how it sounds, but perhaps it *is* in two places at the same time? We’ve proved that an electron can be in two places at one time. So can photons. What if it’s only because we don’t yet have the technology to do so that we can’t do the same with larger objects? What if extra-terrestrials have developed advanced technology to do so?”

She was extremely conscious of how crazy her suggestion sounded.

“It sounds impossible, yes, but if we weren’t open to the possibility of there being intelligent life out there in the cosmos, SETI wouldn’t exist. And we certainly wouldn’t have put the Golden Records on the two Voyagers. Those compartments didn’t open, remove the contents, and then close by themselves. And the missing equipment didn’t just fall off. It was taken. As the author Arthur Conan Doyle wrote — once you eliminate the impossible, whatever remains, no matter how improbable, must be the truth.”

Sitara had the bit between her teeth.

“It’s like Schrödinger’s Cat. Voyager 1 is here on Earth, being examined by our forensic team, while simultaneously being over thirteen billion miles away traveling out of the Solar System. With no definitive evidence to the contrary, until we can prove otherwise, we have to accept that somehow Voyager 1 is both here and out there in space. Voyager 1 is our Schrödinger’s Cat.”

# DAY THREE

26 April– Infected 281 Dead 0

“What do you mean, he’s not saying anything? Didn’t he come forward of his own accord?”

Sitting at his desk in his spacious Washington office, Administrator Tony Healey had a good idea of what the response to his question would be. If he were in the same position he too would insist on some reward. Deputy Administrator Roger Nelson outlined the retiree’s demands.

“He wants immunity from prosecution and his pension upgraded to a full senior management pension with a lump sum payment of two hundred and fifty thousand dollars.”

The Administrator shook his head.

“He’s asking a lot.”

“He knows that, but he also realizes the enormity of the situation at hand. He has a granddaughter with severe medical problems and says he needs to safeguard her future.”

“But how does he know about our Voyager 1 conundrum?”

The Deputy Administrator paused for a second. He didn’t like to admit the obvious answer.

“I don’t know. I guess we have a leak somewhere.”

“Shit.”

“Shit indeed, Tony. We need to find out who the mole is, but that’ll have to wait for the moment.”

“Agreed, Roger. Put another hundred thousand dollars in the pot, but don’t use it unless we have to.”

“Understood.”

The Administrator stood up and paced around the room for a few seconds, his right hand stroking his neatly coiffured beard. He placed both hands palm-down on top of his large mahogany desk and leaned into them.

“And make it conditional on his agreement to a polygraph. I know he has us by the balls, and that lie-detector tests aren’t how we would normally do things, but he doesn’t know that. I need time to get the President on board. Pardons are his department — this man may have committed treason.”

Three hours later, ex-assembly engineer Jonas Wade was sitting in a sparsely furnished and dimly lit room, facing an emotionless heavy-set man whose receding dark hair was just beginning to grey at the temples. On the table that separated them was a polygraph machine. Jonas Wade didn’t much like the idea of having to undergo this procedure, but he needed the money. The emotionless man’s assistant attached nodes onto various parts of Jonas’s body and nodded to the interrogator, who looked straight into the eyes of the engineer.

“Good morning, Mr. Wade. My name is Mr. Anderson. I shall ask you some questions which I want you to answer truthfully. The first few questions will be to provide a benchmark to analyze your responses and calibrate the machine. Do you understand?”

Jonas nodded his agreement and Mr. Anderson started his interrogation, while the Administrator and his deputy looked on from the other side of a two-way mirror.

“What is your job, Mr. Wade?”

“I’m retired. Before that, I was an assembly engineer for JPL.”

“Were you involved in the assembly of the Voyager 1 space probe, Mr. Wade?”

“Yes sir, I was.”

The needle of the polygraph machine busily darted up and down the paper. So far none of the responses was unexpected. After several more simple questions, Mr. Anderson moved on to a more relevant line of questioning.

“You say that you can provide proof that the space probe in our custody, is the very same spacecraft that you helped assemble. Is that true?”

Jonas took a deep breath. He knew that he needed to be honest if he were to receive his money. He wasn’t dealing with fools.

“I believe so.”

Outside the room, the Administrator turned to his Deputy.

“I believe so?”

The interrogator turned his head towards the reflective glass and nodded. The Deputy Administrator clarified the response.

“Technically, it means that he does believe that he can prove whether our space probe is the real Voyager 1 or not. It’s as good as a yes — in these circumstances.”

“So, as far as he is concerned, what he is going to tell us *is* the truth?”

“Exactly.”

Mr. Anderson continued to show no emotion but inside he was secretly excited. The information that he was about to become privy to was extraordinary. He would love to have been able to tell his wife about his day when he got home that night, but he knew he couldn’t. He had to be professional. He turned back to face Jonas.

“What is this proof, Mr. Wade?”

Jonas knew that he was about to cross a line, that he would be unable to retract what he was about to confess, but his daughter needed those house conversions to make his disabled granddaughter’s life more comfortable. He knew what he was doing.

“May I have a cigarette?”

The interrogator’s assistant pointed to a no-smoking sign on the wall. Jonas shrugged his shoulders.

“No harm in asking.”

The interrogation continued.

“How can you prove that the space vehicle we have in custody is the original Voyager 1?”

Jonas grinned. Not a sardonic grin but more a grin of self-indulgent pleasure at the memory of what he had done on that day over forty years ago.

“I left some of my DNA on the inside of one of them there panels. Just a speck of blood, you know, but still enough for part of me to go into space.”

The Administrator and the Deputy looked at each other aghast. Did he really just say that? Surprised as Mr. Anderson was at this revelation, he didn’t react and simply continued his line of questioning.

“How did you do that?”

“I was responsible for mounting the communication subsystem into one of the Bus compartments. It was a simple thing to nick my finger and leave a tiny bloodstain on a mounting bracket before attaching the subsystem to the back of the compartment. Especially back then.”

“What do you mean, especially back then?”

“Well, security is surely much better now. I’m sure I couldn’t do it these days without being spotted.”

“Tell us how you did it.”

Jonas’s confidence was growing.

“There’s no point in telling you now. It was forty-plus years ago. Systems and processes have completely changed. I did it. I probably couldn’t do it nowadays. That’s all you need to know.”

The interrogator changed the direction of the questioning.

“Why did you do it?”

“Call me an old fool if you like, but I’d always wanted to be an astronaut. I also knew that it was never going to happen. I was never fit enough, not even back then when I was younger. So I thought I’d do the next best thing and send a bit of me into space.”

Administrator Healey wanted to know how his staff hadn’t spotted the bloodspot during their forensic investigations, but that would have to wait. He took his phone from his pocket and sent a text to the investigating team supervisor to stop what they were doing and remove the panels from the communications subsystem compartment for more intensive screening.

The interrogator felt his phone vibrate in his pocket and took it out, tapping the touchscreen to activate the display. He read the message silently and then repeated its content.

“We’ll need a sample of your DNA, Mr. Wade. Do you agree to us taking a saliva sample?”

Jonas felt that now he was in control of the situation.

“It’ll cost you another fifty thousand bucks.”

The interrogator’s phone vibrated again.

“Agreed.”

Jonas was happy with that.

“Fifty grand, just for spitting into a test tube. That’s what I call a bargain.”

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Tony Healey returned to his office with his deputy, leaving Mr. Anderson to seek the source of the leak, and poured a couple of large scotches for himself and Roger. He sat down in a burgundy leather armchair, his favorite of the two that were in his office, and rested his glass on the coffee table that separated the two men. Roger, sitting opposite him in a matching chair, took a sip of his drink and placed it back on the table. Tony leaned forward a little.

“So, What do you think? Could this be the proof we’re looking for?”

The Deputy Administrator nodded.

“It looks like it, Tony. It all depends if the DNA’s survived the rigors of space. There was a recent experiment that proved that genetic material could survive a flight through space and re-entry into Earth’s atmosphere, at least for a short journey. A team of scientists from the University of Zurich proved it. But we have no idea if DNA could have survived for this long and over such a large distance. But — and it’s a ‘but’ with a capital B — if there’s enough of it still intact, *and* it matches that of Jonas Wade, a whole new can of worms will open up.”

The Administrator took his first sip of whisky.

“I don’t know what I fear most, Roger. That this is all an elaborate hoax, or that it *is* the same probe we launched forty years ago. If the DNA matches, it’ll raise so many questions like how did it get here? Why is it here? What does that mean for the Voyager we’re still getting signals from, the one that’s over thirteen billion miles away? Is that a phantom? Is our equipment faulty? And what about Voyager 2 for that matter?”

The Deputy needed another sip of whisky.

“Or, even scarier, what if they’re both the real Voyager 1 like Doctor Khan suggested? That would suggest technology that defies the laws of physics as we understand them.”

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At a maximum security JPL laboratory in Pasadena, a small group of men and women gazed through a toughened glass window at an enigma, the Voyager 1 space probe. As Voyager 1 had returned to Earth from deep space it had been automatically designated a Restricted Class V contamination risk, in line with the "Outer Space" Treaty of 1967. Thus the group was dressed in full biological insulation protective garments and had undergone a rigorous decontamination process, just as the spacecraft had done before the JPL technical staff began their analyses and investigations. The fear of cross-contamination in either direction was very real, and nobody — not even the President of the United States — was exempt from the process.

The President had been kept informed of the recent return to Earth of the space probe and had been advised not to visit the laboratory where it was being examined, but, being the person he was, he’d ignored the advice of his advisors and insisted on making the trip to JPL to see the celebrity spaceship (as he liked to call it) in situ. He pointed to the object on the other side of the glass.

“I want to go in there and see the spaceship close up.”

Gerald Rickman, the Director of JPL, shook his head.

“I’m sorry Mr. President, but I’m afraid you can’t go in there.”

The President gave the Director a steely stare.

“I’ll pretend I didn’t hear that, Gerald. I assume all decontamination protocols have been followed to the letter?”

“Well, yes Mr. President. Of course. But that doesn’t mean — “

“Doesn’t mean what, Gerald?”

“It doesn’t mean that it’s completely one hundred percent safe.”

The President gestured to the half a dozen technicians on the other side of the glass who were working on the space probe.



“If it’s not safe, then why are they in there?”

The Director was becoming flustered. How do you say no to this particular President of the United States and keep your job? Men in higher positions than him had been dismissed from their posts, for far lesser reasons.

“But you’re the President. You’re the most important man in this great nation. You’re the leader of the free world. We can’t risk anything happening to you.”

The Director hoped that this blatant display of sycophancy might win the day. The President loved to be flattered. However, the President was not to be dissuaded.

“Thank you for your concern, Gerald, but I haven’t just gone through a rather unpleasant decontamination process just to look at the thing through a pane of glass.”

No amount of cajoling or protests, by the JPL Director or the President’s own staff could persuade the President that he should be satisfied with simply looking at Voyager 1 from a safe distance. The President was determined.

“The spaceship has been decontaminated to the fullest extent possible, yes?”

The Director was forced to concede that it had been. The President continued.

“And I have been decontaminated to the fullest extent possible, yes?”

“Yes, but Mr. President.”

“And this protective suit I’m wearing is the best there is. State-of-the-art, yes?”

“Yes. Mr. President, but –.”

“Then that’s good enough for me. Let’s go in.”

The President nodded to a member of the laboratory staff to open the door and then walked into the room, making a bee-line towards the probe, feeling very happy with himself. He spent about five minutes strolling around Voyager 1, examining the spacecraft and nodding to himself occasionally, trying to give the impression that he understood what he was looking at. He returned to the waiting group with a huge smile on his face. He enjoyed being President; it allowed him to do things that the common man or woman couldn’t. And nobody could stop him. He was the only one that mattered.

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Back in Dutch Harbor, Grant Schumacher was looking forward to his time off, time on dry land instead of at sea on the Alaskan Mermaid. Even though his job was tough physical work he enjoyed it and a month of kicking back and doing nothing — nothing fishing-related anyway — was exactly what he needed. It was the end of the Pollock A season, Pollock B season didn’t start until June, and he’d booked a flight to Anchorage for the next day. From there he would fly on to Seattle, where his family would be waiting at the airport for him. Unlike most trips, this time he would have a really interesting story to tell — how they’d caught a fallen satellite in their nets, and how NASA had come to check it out and then had taken it away by helicopter. He made a mental note to remember to tell his teenage daughters that the scientist who had come to examine the thing was a woman. They were both interested in science and it would be good for them to know that such opportunities existed. He’d have loved to have had the opportunity to sit down and have a chat with Sitara, but she’d been far too busy for small talk. Just the fact that she was there, as a NASA scientist, would be an inspiration to his girls.

His first night on shore was to be 'Grant time'. He had family responsibilities in Seattle but the first evening back would be spent with his crewmates in their favorite local bar, The Norwegian Rat Saloon, before going their separate ways. After a long hot shower at his friend Richie's company apartment, freshly clean-shaven (like most of his shipmates he had grown a bushy beard during the weeks at sea) and smelling sweet as a daisy, he made his way to join Richie and the rest of the crew. Most of the fishing vessels had already docked a couple of weeks earlier, offloaded their catches, and flooded the town with hundreds of noisy raucous fishermen wanting to let off steam before leaving for their respective homes. Much like the cowboys of the old West returning from a cattle drive, they could be quite a handful at times but this night the twenty-six Unalaska Police Officers would have a much easier time. The town bars would be busy but, without the sheer weight of numbers of returning fishermen adding to the confusion, the police patrols could almost relax.

Arriving at the Unalaskan bar, Grant walked over to a group of tables near the bar where Richie and several others of their shipmates were sitting. The table was already crowded with both full and empty bottles of Wild Blue lager. Richie raised a newly opened bottle of beer while handing another to Grant.

"You're late Grant. You've got a fair bit of catching up to do."

Grant took a swig of Wild Blue and looked at the plates on the table that betrayed that his friends had already eaten. His stomach rumbled and reminded him that it needed attention.

"I've got to get some food inside me first, Rich. I'm starving."

He ordered himself a Thor Burger. If Angus beef, pulled pork, molasses BBQ, and onion rings didn't silence his stomach, nothing would. There were two main reasons why Grant liked The Norwegian Rat. First, he thought the burgers were to die for, and second, after spending weeks at sea with only his male shipmates to look at, it was a welcome relief to be able to see some pretty female faces behind the bar. The fact that the women were both friendly and good at their job was a bonus. However, he was very happily married and would never dream of straying.

The main topic of conversation in the bar that night was, understandably, the recovery of the satellite. The crew were perfectly happy with Sitara's explanation and didn't doubt her when she said that it was a reasonably common event. The trawler's skipper, Dean Romanski, a scrupulously fair man, had already assured the men that any reward for finding the satellite would be shared equally and, although they hadn't received any money yet (and had no real idea how much it would be), they couldn't help spending it in their heads. Some would spend it on new cars, some on vacations, some on house improvements, but Grant knew what his share would go on. With two teenage daughters who both wanted to study science at college, what better cause than their college funds? And, if there was some money left over, then maybe a family vacation to Disney World. The girls had always wanted to go there and now, perhaps, they'd be able to take that dream holiday. But education came first.

Grant and his friends sentenced forty-seven people to death in the bar that night. They didn't want to kill them, and they had no idea that they'd done so, but the fact that they'd celebrated in the company of others that night had sealed the fate of those forty-seven Amaknak Island residents.

# DAY FOUR

27 April – Infected 1,405 Dead 0

Alaska Airlines flight AS3299 from Tom Madson Airport left on time the next day, at 12:40 prompt. The take-off was uneventful, despite the runway being bordered by a large hill on one side and a steep drop off to the ocean on the other. For the first-time visitor, it could be a slightly unnerving experience, but both the pilot and Grant had taken off from Dutch Harbor many times previously. Half the passengers on the Saab 2000 turboprop aircraft were from the Alaskan Mermaid and most were still nursing the remnants of the morning's hangovers. Grant, however, was surprised how little he was suffering and settled down to while away the two and a half hour flight to Anchorage by reading the latest issue of *The Bristol Bay Times*. Most of his shipmates slept, trying to quell the thump-thump-thumping in their heads with the relief of unconsciousness.

By the time the plane landed at Anchorage International Airport, at 15:05 local time, twenty more passengers and the flight crew had been unwittingly served a death sentence.

Grant was now faced with a wait of nearly seven hours before his flight to Seattle — a long time to spend in an airport lounge, even if the airport was modern and had good facilities. He could have rented a car and visited Lake Hood or driven south on the Seward Highway along the Turnagin Arm, taking in the beautiful scenery, but that was the kind of thing he liked to do with his family. So he did what he normally did and took a taxi to downtown Anchorage.

He made his way straight to the 5th Avenue Mall, to begin his rehabilitation to civilization. He enjoyed the remoteness of Dutch Harbor and the challenge and hard work of the weeks at sea, but it felt good to return to the land of Starbucks, Foot Locker, and the Apple Store. While at the mall, he bought a couple of designer fleeces for the girls (they could never have too many fleeces) and a beautiful pair of elegant gold earrings for Nadine. They had a wedding to go to in two weeks and he thought that they'd go well with whatever dress she decided to buy for the event. He'd have loved to have surprised her with a new dress, but that was something best bought together. It was a dangerous business for a man to buy a dress for a woman in her absence, so he'd wait until they could go shopping together back in Seattle. A succulent steak at Sullivan's Steakhouse finished off the evening well, giving him plenty of time to return to the airport and catch his flight back home.

Alaska Airlines flight AS106 took off on time at 21:50, and had a perfectly smooth journey to Seattle, leaving hundreds more walking dead back in Anchorage.