

Phantom Cosmonauts

A Short Story Written by

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As told from the point of view of Captain Patrick Kirk of the Earth Space Agency

In all my years of training, nothing ever prepared me for the mission I was about to embark upon. I had spent the last two years focusing on this specific mission, training, preparing, and hoping for success. Space travel had come a long way by the time I grew up, no longer did we have the now archaic propulsion system of combustion but the wonderfully efficient warp drive propulsion system. Warp drive was developed secretly since the 20th century, and a lot of the conspiracy theories about area 51 were true. Area 51 was ground zero and many scientists from around the world were sworn to secrecy while working there. I grew up in the 2180s obsessing over space travel, in 2181 almost all documents involving area 51 and warp drive were declassified. It was an exciting time but also kind of frightening for some people, on the one hand, we knew that we were not alone in the universe but on the other hand, that same fact scared many people. We were told the Roswell incident of 1947 happened and there was a crashed spacecraft with a small crew of lifeforms. Before communication could be established all four of the crew members died, no information of any kind, their names, language, home planet, nothing. After this it was agreed, the United States would try to secretly reverse engineer the spacecraft and technology inside. 2081 was the year of full disclosure, I was so excited I immediately joined the joint Earth Space Agency in hopes to venture into space, but I never expected what came next.

I was always top of my class in science and engineering so once I joined the ESA, I raised through the ranks rather quickly. I was after 3 years given full disclosure and full access to everything. I learned of the long-developed warp drive and how many secret missions were undertaken to test it. The secret missions went back to the 1980s and many of the astronauts went missing in action or died altogether. The warp drive technology was so far advanced that scientists and engineers were having a difficult time getting it to work. Manned missions stopped in the 2160s while development continued, scientists finally through computer simulations came up with a way to make warp drive work. All that was needed was a test, a new manned mission. That is where I come in.

I had been in the ESA for 18 years; I have been to the International Space Station several times and worked with the crew. I was no stranger to outer space, but I felt a sense of fear and excitement when my commander came to me. She explained that with my experience I was chosen to lead the first manned mission to test warp drive since the 2160s. I was given free rein as to my choice of crew and whatever else I may need. I got to work immediately combing through the ESA roster, I had to make sure I had the best crew I could have and one I could trust. There would be four ESA astronauts I would need to accompany me, a pilot, an engineer, a medical officer, and of course a warp drive specialist. I combed the list and came up with some of my most outstanding colleagues who also happened to be good friends. My pilot would be Lieutenant Ray Hanson, his piloting skills were the best of anyone. My engineer would be Lieutenant Commander Regina Kowaleska, one of the top engineers in the world. My medical officer would be Dr. Takashi Kunisada, a man of my age and a caring and skilled doctor, we both enlisted the same year. My warp drive specialist would be the foremost expert on the technology and the man responsible for the successful tests that led to this mission, Lieutenant Commander Alexei Makarov. With my crew selected we began our training and spent the next year running tests and simulations until we had a 99% success rate. Excitement ran high amongst all five of us that year.

I spent a great deal with Lt. Commander Makarov as I was interested in how the warp drive worked. He explained to me that it was exactly what it sounded like, it warped space and time around the ship to where it propelled the ship faster than light. What would normally take light years now could be traversed in a mere fraction of the time. The energy required to create the warp bubble around the ship though was massive. The energy was the only thing holding us back for so long, but it was finally figured out. Element 115 was long thought to be a tall tale, it was said amongst conspiracy theorists that this element was key in extraterrestrials' abilities to travel through space but there was no evidence of its existence.

That is until its discovery at area 51, once discovered in the spacecraft that crashed in Roswell scientists and engineers tried to synthesize it to no avail. It took decades to finally synthesize element 115 and once it was, the early development of the warp drive began. Element 115 once activated in the warp engine created anti-matter that had the energy to warp space and time. Makarov had spent most of his adult life in the ESA and passionately worked to get the warp drive in such a working condition that we could travel among the stars. The warp drive was now in the best working condition it ever has been, and we were about to be the first crew to use it, we were going to make history.

The week leading up to the launch we were all brought in for a meeting with the Admiral of the ESA, we thought it was just last-minute preparations and discussions, but it turned out we were being let in on a little secret. Our main purpose was to test the warp drive but if successful we had another purpose. Through the years it was theorized that the crew of extraterrestrials that crash-landed in Roswell all those years ago and gave us the technology to reverse engineer came from Zeta Reticuli a star system 39 light years away. If the warp drive test is successful, we are to go to Zeta Reticuli and try to make contact with the species that traveled to Earth centuries ago.

The world was in awe, we were all over the news and excitement was at an all-time high. We had the most state-of-the-art ship, it was a decent size, roughly that of a small cruise vessel. It had 10 decks, well 9 actually, deck 10 was the bridge. The warp drive before activation worked as a launching device to get us past the atmosphere and into space. We took our tour the night before the launch and inspected everything, all systems were perfect we were ready. All of us decided we would stay at the station since most of our time would be on the ship itself. We had a great meal and many laughs; we listened to music and just enjoyed each other's company. I was barely able to sleep due to the excitement, we would be making history and possibly after centuries would make contact with extraterrestrial life.

We awoke on launch day and made every preparation, double and triple-checked even. The time was here, and the Admiral came into our dorm and addressed us.

"You all are about to make history. We have tirelessly put our resources into this mission and have the utmost confidence in all of you. When you have successfully activated the warp drive and arrive at Zeta Reticuli it will be up to you to observe the system and its planets and civilizations. Contact them only if you are confident enough to communicate with them. The world is with you, good luck." The Admiral said

The launch went off without a problem, we made it past the atmosphere and entered orbit. We communicated with ground control and broke orbit; we were passed the moon when we decided to begin the warp drive test.

"Ground control this is Captain Patrick Kirk, we are ready to begin the test," I communicated

"Captain Kirk, when you and your crew are ready you have permission to begin," Ground Control responded

"Makarov, are we ready?" I asked

"Affirmative Captain," Makarov said

With a mixture of fear and excitement, I gave the order "You may begin Lieutenant Commander"

Makarov flipped a few switches and a button lit up red. He looked at me with a smile and pressed it. The ship began to lightly rumble, a loud hum began to permeate throughout, and we all felt the hum in our bodies. Outside the window of the bridge light began to distort, everything looked as though it was

stretching. We felt a large jolt and heard a pop, outside the window I thought I caught a glimpse of something in the shape of a person, but that had to be my mind playing tricks. An effect of the warp drive possibly. Makarov deactivated the drive, we did it, we were looking at Mars. A journey that would normally take months just took minutes. We all jumped out of our seats in excitement and hugged each other, we had successfully used warp drive.

The first thing I noticed was the color of the planet, Mars in all my knowledge had always had a red color its nickname was the red planet. But the color was more violet almost purple, the entire surface rocks and everything. I looked at Makarov and his glance back was answering me without even speaking, he did not know what to make of it either. The rest of the crew didn't seem to notice they were all so happy and excited the drive worked, so I pulled Makarov to the side and whispered to him.

“What is going on?” I asked

“I'm not sure Captain. I don't want to alarm you, but readings are off as well,” Makarov said

“What readings?” I asked

“The coordinates do not match up with our charts, according to all of our systems we are not even in our solar system,” Makarov explained

“Let's try to make contact with Earth, don't alarm the others just fill them in and report back to me when you hear something,” I said

“Aye Captain,” Makarov said

I sat back in the captain's chair on the bridge and looked long and hard out the window at the miscolored planet. This looked exactly like every picture I have ever seen of Mars just minus the color, I couldn't make any sense of it at all. The rest of the crew never really seemed to notice, they were all excitedly discussing the next step, although if we couldn't figure this out, I doubt we would continue to Zeta Reticuli. Makarov was frantically using the controls to try and communicate home, but I could tell from his face that it wasn't working. He came over to me after about ten minutes to relay the news.

"Captain, I am having no luck with communication. It's nothing but static, the planet may be interfering, may I suggest moving back a little to adjust for interference?" Makarov asked

“Hanson prepare the ship to move closer toward Earth we are getting communication interference. Makarov prepare the warp drive and engage when ready, I would like to relay back home our success.” I ordered

The ship made its turnaround and Makarov activated the warp drive for a split second. We found ourselves in the opposite direction further from Mars and according to Makarov we had a clear signal home now. I ordered him to communicate home what had happened and then asked Hanson to just turn us around to face Mars. Once we had the planet in sight I was in utter shock, Makarov and I caught each other's gaze both surprised and a bit confused. Mars was red, no more violet or purple. According to Makarov, all charts were working again, and we were at the correct coordinates. After several minutes with Earth Makarov came over to me.

“Captain, they said we disappeared from their radar for the few minutes we were in front of Mars,” Makarov said

“Do they have any idea what happened?” I asked

“No sir, they were hoping we could tell them,” Makarov said

“Did you tell them about the colors?” I asked

“Yes sir, they said it must have been side effects of the warp drives use,” Makarov said

“Anything else?” I asked

"Yes sir, ESA command says to continue to Zeta Reticuli," Makarov said

I stopped and felt something deep inside me, fear. Maybe Makarov and ESA command was right that it was just side effects, and I was overreacting.

“Makarov, you are the expert on this thing, tell me, is it possible that was just a side effect?” I asked

“It is more than likely sir; it just caught me off guard. This is the first time warp drive has ever been successful,” Makarov said

“Okay, let’s make preparations to head to Zeta Reticuli. Everyone ready?” I asked

The crew responded with an ecstatic yes and we began to set systems to make the 39-light-year trip to this new and uncharted star system. According to everything that Hanson and Makarov prepared it should take us roughly two hours to make the trip. Here we were the first humans from planet Earth to travel the stars faster than light and we were possibly about to make first contact with an alien species. The ship started its humming and the warp drive activated, the quick pop and then the distorted look outside the window of the bridge. This time we were moving more calmly, either that or we all were getting used to the faster-than-light travel. We all decided to retreat to our quarters for the remainder of the trip, except Hanson who decided to remain in the pilot's seat rather than activate auto-pilot.

I started walking down the corridor to my quarters but stopped right outside my door, out of the corner of my eye I thought I saw a person. I quickly investigated but there was nothing, none of the other crew members were even down this corridor. My mind must be playing tricks on me, likely another side effect of warp travel. Once in my room, I sit on my bed and begin to relax, at least relax the best I could, what an exciting time for us all to be here. I was about to pull out my data tablet when Hanson called from the bridge.

"Captain, I think you should come up here sir," Hanson said

“On my way Lieutenant,” I said

I wasted no time and ran to the bridge, once through the doors I see what was bothering Hanson. The communication light was flashing, someone was trying to contact us. I had Hanson call Makarov as he was the communication expert as well as the warp drive expert, but I still tried to answer the call.

“This is Captain Patrick Kirk of the Earth Space Agency, with who am I speaking?” I asked

I heard static for a few seconds and then voices. They sounded similar to us but in a language, I couldn't recognize. Wow what an exciting moment, we were communicating with extraterrestrials. About that time Makarov made his way in and over to the communication station. I told him there were voices and to work on trying to establish communication with the beings. About that time another transmission came through and the same sounding words in that strange language came through. Makarov heard every word and stood there silent for about a minute after the end of the transmission, his face looked like he was in shock. Makarov looked at me with fear in his eyes.

"Captain... they are speaking Russian," Makarov said

"Russian!? How is that possible?" I asked in disbelief

"I don't know Captain, but it is Russian, it is my mother tongue," Makarov said

"What are they saying?" I asked

"They are scared, but they keep repeating help us they are here, they are after us," Makarov said

"Communicate back, find out where they are and if we can help," I ordered

Makarov communicated back with the voices in Russian, he spent ten minutes talking back and forth with them. Meanwhile, I tried to wrap my head around the situation, how were people this far from Earth speaking Russian? To the best of my knowledge, we were the only mission in the last thirty years, and none of this was adding up. Makarov stood up from the communication station and relayed the information.

"Captain, they say they are cosmonauts on a mission to test warp drive and they have become lost," Makarov said

"Cosmonauts? That term hasn't been used in centuries," I said

"That's not all Captain, they say they are from the Soviet Union," Makarov said

"The Soviet Union!? That sovereign state hasn't existed in over 200 years" I said

"They do not know how to tell where they are, but I was able to track them using the communication lines. We are not far from them, should we go check it out, sir?" Makarov asked

"Yes absolutely, set coordinates to the cosmonauts. Makarov, what is after them, did you ask?" I asked

"Yes, I asked, they do not know they just kept repeating in fear that it is coming for them" Makarov explained

"It doesn't matter, we must help them. Dr. Kunisada, Lt. Commander Kowaleska prepare for spacewalk, we may have to enter their ship," I ordered

The three of us prepared for a search and rescue as Hanson took us to the coordinates of the ship. As we came upon the derelict ship I noticed the bright red letters on the side of the ancient-looking shuttle, as bright as could be СССР. The ship was most definitely of Soviet origin and looked like it had been out here in deep space since the days of the Soviet Union. Hanson reported he could not detect any life signs but the old hull could be interfering with our scans. I ordered Dr. Kunisada and Kowaleska with me, and we made our way to the airlock to prepare for our space walk. Hanson piloted our ship next to the Soviet vessel and we docked with it to the side. The airlock sealed and then opened on the outside door to the side of the Soviet vessel. I brought out my cutting torch and begin to cut into the hull of the old vessel, it still played in my head, and I continued to question it all. How did a vessel this old get this deep into space? I cut successfully into the hull and the three of us walked into the old vessel hoping to rescue these cosmonauts that asked for our help. If they were even in here at all.

The three of us walked into the vessel, there wasn't much to it but we looked all over, everything was intact nothing out of the ordinary. Everything was perfectly preserved, there was no sign of any distress, and only one more section, the cockpit. We pried open the door to the cockpit and once inside we saw two people sitting in each seat in ancient cosmonaut suits. I ran up frantically but was taken aback by the

horror once I came up on the cosmonauts. Inside the helmets were long decomposed bodies with looks of fear on their faces. I kept thinking to myself that this was impossible, how could these men be out this far and for this long? I called Makarov instantly.

“Makarov, try to make communication with the cosmonauts again,” I ordered

“Aye Captain,” Makarov said

After several minutes Makarov came back.

"Sir, I can not establish communication with the cosmonauts, but I did contact ESA Command. They say to leave the bodies and the vessel as is and continue the mission as ordered." Makarov said

“Leave the bodies? No, we can’t we have to bring them home. Identify them if possible and give them a proper burial. Dr. Kunisada when we get the bodies on board prepare the morgue for them. It is the least we can do for them.” I said

Dr. Kunisada, Lt. Commander Kowaleska, and I brought the bodies back on board and went back to our stations. Once in place, we continued back to our mission at hand and activated the warp drive. The ship hummed and let out its signature pop and we were back en route to Zeta Reticuli. I kept thinking of those cosmonauts, where did they come from, what happened to them and how the hell did they contact us. We sat in silence all probably contemplating the situation at hand when the strangest thing happened, the communication light began to flash again.

Makarov looked frightened as he answered the call, it was the cosmonauts again, screaming in Russian.

“Captain, they’re screaming that they don’t recognize where they are. They are not on their vessel, and nothing looks familiar.” Makarov said

“Talk to them, find out where they’re at and how they’re communicating,” I ordered

Makarov talked for what seemed like forever then looked back at me with fear in his eyes.

“Captain, they say they don’t know how they are communicating; they are just yelling for help and can hear us. Sir, they say they activated the warp drive and got lost.” Makarov explained

“Hanson, did that vessel have a warp signature?” I asked

“Yes sir, but very small,” Hanson said

“And you failed to mention that?” I asked

“I’m sorry sir it was a minute amount. I didn’t think it worth mentioning,” Hanson said

"A two hundred-plus-year-old vessel with a warp signature and you didn't think it worth mentioning!?" I asked angrily

“I’m sorry Captain...” Hanson started

“Never mind that now, Makarov ask them about the warp drive. What were they using it for,” I ordered

Makarov returned to speaking to the cosmonauts in Russian and seemed to be gaining information, he talked another few minutes and then returned to explain to me.

"Captain, they say it was a secret Soviet operation, that their scientists worked to reverse engineer a downed alien spacecraft. They found that the aliens originated from Zeta Reticuli and that their operation was to establish contact with the aliens before the Americans could. Once they activated the drive it worked fine for several minutes then it broke, and they could not fix it. Everything to them is colored purple sir, just like how Mars was when we took off. They don't know how long they have been lost sir and some creatures were chasing them but that seemed to have stopped," Makarov explained

It took everything in me not to cry out in fear as I took in what Makarov was telling me. We had two bodies of cosmonauts on board here and a transmission of two cosmonauts begging for help. I couldn't figure out this conundrum, I did not have the slightest clue as to what was happening here. I counseled with Hanson, Kowaleska, and Makarov, and based on the information Makarov received and with the four of us working together we came up with this. When their drive (and ours as well since we saw the purple coloring) activated it transported them to an alternate dimension and these men were stuck there and have been for over 200 years. That still didn't solve the mystery of the two bodies we found on that vessel, could it be they were two other members of the crew that didn't get transported?

With our hypothesis formed Makarov came up with the idea to go back to the vessel while in the opposite dimension and look for these men. Makarov told the cosmonauts who were still in transmission with us what we planned to do when one of the most frightening things came out of Makarov's mouth.

"Captain, they said they can see us, they are on the bridge as we speak and one of the creatures that chase them followed them here," Makarov said with a tremble of fear in his voice

"All stop NOW!!" I ordered

The ship came to a screeching halt and by the looks of outside the window, we were still in our dimension. I looked over and ordered Makarov and Hanson to activate and then deactivate the warp drive to put us in the other dimension. The tactic worked and we were staring into a purple-tinted abyss and standing next to Makarov were two cosmonauts wearing the identical suits and nametags of the bodies in our makeshift morgue. The two cosmonauts looked so happy and relieved to see us and ran and hugged Makarov. They began speaking in Russian and Makarov looked back at me with more fear in his eyes.

"Captain, they are from 1961, all they remember is their skin burning and peeling under their suits then they woke up and everything was purple, and a creature was chasing them," Makarov said

"They're the bodies we have on board Makarov, their suits and name tags match. how is this possible?" I asked

We all walked to the morgue to see if Dr. Kunisada could make heads or tails of this. Once we got to the morgue the lights were flashing and the door had been broken into. We walked in and there was Dr. Kunisada sprawled across the floor with a slash across his chest. He was dead, his lifeless face staring back at us. The cosmonauts explained to Makarov the creature did it, I wasn't sure what to believe my fear was at an all-time high. The cosmonauts' bodies were missing as well, maybe this creature took them. None of us could process what was happening before we heard a deafening screech and then a bright white light brighter than anything we had ever seen filled the room. The screech went to each one of us stopping to kill Hanson, Kowaleska, and then Makarov, it never touched the cosmonauts. Once it killed Makarov I hid in the vents, I could see the light dissipate, and standing next to the cosmonauts was the creature. Tall in golden armor with the head and face of a serpent and the pure white feathered wings of a bird. The creature held a large scythe likely what was used to kill all of my crew. I just froze in shock and fear.

Then appearing next to the creature were Kunisada, Hanson, Kowaleska, and Makarov along with the 2 cosmonauts. Their faces filled with the grimace of fear, not responding to anything but the creature. The bright light shone and filled the room once again and in a flash, they all were gone. I noticed something was left on the floor once they were all gone. I snuck over and grabbed it then made my way for the bridge. I ran to the pilot's station to set a course home and then to the warp drive station to activate it. The warp drive was broken, and I have no clue how to fix it. So, I am sending this message out to anyone that can hear me, don't use warp drive. It's not safe, there are things out here that we shouldn't be toying with, space is dangerous. I am stuck and likely if you're hearing this, I am dead, I can feel my skin begin to peel and it has been burning since I've been alone. The ship is still drifting in the purple dimension and according to the radar I can pick up Zeta Reticuli now, there are signs of life, but I don't know if I will live to see them or if they will even see me in this other dimension. I do notice one thing, the item the creature dropped after disappearing is a solid gold symbol and it matches several symbols I can see on the planet's surface, likely massively large structures. I put the symbol into the ship's computer and the results come back, it is an ancient text, an alphabet from thousands of years ago, the symbol means God.

