The Last Astronaut

Part One

“A gathering of angels

Appeared above my head

They sang to me this song of

Hope

And this is what they said...

... I thought that they were

Angels

But to my surprise

We climbed aboard their

Starship

We headed for the skies...”

—Come Sail Away

Song by Styx

I am pretty much dead.

Not a shock, really, moving on the edges of space, counting the days, the miles in lightyears.. just like in my NASA guidebook. Not really a guidebook, a stay alive book. Right. Flying through the quiet space darkness, until the end.

I blame politics, yeah, and blame Kennedy, sort of, and the War for Space, you fight over nothingness, you fools. But, we keep patching together pieces, trying this and that, hoping the tests won’t blow up on camera or TV, and that’s what happened to me. Sort of...

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Ion drive. Remember that? I'm sure you don't. I didn't.

I was progressing so-so on my "astronaut" training one day, and Colonel Barnes, a NASA officer on the project, pulled me aside, and said I had been selected for a test flight.

I remember asking, "Where?" but he just shook his head. "Above my pay grade." And that started me on this "mission."

You hear about the mission all the time. The *holy grail*, why are we doing this? What will we learn of value? Who made up this stuff? I covertly asked several CIA friends to check for me, and some reported my mission was classified Top Secret - Eyes Only. That's the first mystery I found along the way to space.

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All I have for this history story is some blue composition notebooks, where I've scribbled this down. There's a lot I don't know, I'll be honest, but this is how I remember the events from where I am now. --Commander Crowder, added to the Freedom-X Archives, date unknown.

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Part 2 - 1962

“I suppose the one quality

in an astronaut more powerful

than any other is curiosity.

They have to get some place nobody’s ever been.”

— John Glenn

Day One

I am Navy Commander Skyler Crowder, and I was in the early astronaut training, emergency backups for the Mercury missions, fresh from flying some missions in test flights at NASA’s Lewis Research Center in Ohio.

Just a solo test pilot, backing up the selected golden ones. On that first day, Colonel Barnes asked to see me in his office, and I was on time.

“Good to see you, Sky,” Barnes said, shaking my hand. I sat down, “Yes, sir.” He opened a manila folder on his desk, and started telling me about “Freedom X.”

“There’s a new mission just getting started, Sky, and we’d like you to pilot the mission.,” he

said, looking up from the folder. “We call it Freedom X, well, because it’s dealing with some unknowns. Do you have any knowledge of UFOs?”

I sat up a bit. “Well, you know the usual crazy stories, false sightings, and swamp gas,” and I laughed a bit. “Not much.”

“Truth is, Commander, we don’t know much either. But, this latest anomaly has NASA and national security in a tailspin. They want to know more. And fast.”

“What anomaly, sir?” I waited.

He looked up from the folder, and handed me a grainy-looking space photograph, obviously taken from some ground-based telescope. “Our Photography people captured this a week ago.”

I looked at the partly blurred image, and I started seeing the white edges of “something,” seemingly in motion, while the surrounding dark space was in clear focus. “What am I looking at?” *Something was moving in the image, but why and where?*

“That’s what the mission is, Sky. They want you to go find out. And, believe me, this is top secret, straight from the White House.”

I let that sink in a moment. “It sounds important. Do we know any plans, or details yet?”

He paused, stood up, and went closer to my chair, looked down at me, maybe with sympathy or compassion. “It’s being finished as we speak. And Sky —I need you to know it’s a one-way mission.” He paused, and then continued.

“When you go up, we have no way to get you back home. We’ll have the data you send us, which hopefully makes it worth it. Damn it to hell if I know why sending a man on a one-way mission over this is so important.”

I sat back in the chair. Of course, they picked me, my life story said there was no one to leave behind; NASA knew that, family gone, no spouse or girlfriend now. I was the best “candidate.” Always, pick “the best.”

And it all went downhill from there. And what could go wrong with an astronaut wanna-be nicknamed Sky?

Day Two

I couldn’t talk to anyone about this secret mission, Colonel said, and I didn’t have anyone to tell anyway. So I hunkered down for the days before launch, and I imagined I was an astronaut and heading into outer space, the Last Frontier, the Unknown. He did tell me that “one day,” the “American people will know what you did.” Well, okay then.

Day Three

During the several days of pre-flight preparations, I had trouble sleeping from early on, so I began reading at night, some of those books I had picked up recently from the base library, to read during the training.

I started with Mitchner’s “Hawaii,” all the royal history and the early changes along the way. Then, I tried to pass the evenings with Steinbeck’s “The Winter of Our Discontent,” but the down-beat, worrisome life of the hero was too much suffering and philosophy right now, so I stopped.

The initial NASA Engineering Review came and went, being a loud and arguing, shouting match

over weight or functionality or necessity for something in the capsule besides me.

The capsule was around 100 cubic feet inside, and the launch weight was locked in stone as their “goal.” For the days ahead, they were ripping things out, sticking this thing in, controls, switches, fuses, mechanical levers. I had no vote, but I watched with concern for their choices. My life, at least in space, until it wasn’t, was in their hands. They gave me a list of the change they made for me and the mission. It was four pages long.

Day Four

The changes continued, some kind of oxygen system was approved and compacted in I heard from an engineering guy, “You will have air,” he said. That left food and water to kill me at some point. One up, two down.

They did squeeze in the capsule some tubes of “food” that were fresh from a laboratory test of longevity. The total water allowed was a 10-day supply for a normal human being. After which, a report sheet said, “It’s human grade survivable, but there’s a limit to how much we can liftoff with.”

Day Five

More team members of Freedom X signed off on the mission, and we packed up and moved to Cape Canaveral in Florida, where the Redstone rocket was headed for the launch pad.

We settled in the billets set aside for housing, and things were moving ahead like a countdown

clock. My sleep that night was troubled dreams, something or somewhere there was no light at all, but I could see the darkness. I woke up in cold sweat before dawn. Almost time to fly...

Day Six (Launch Day)

There wasn't much more to do, at least for me. The Freedom X team was busy of course, still weighing this and that, removing this and that, added the "supplies" for my capsule trip. I had some nice telegrams on that day, one from an astronaut I hadn't met in person, it was John Glenn. "Go Mission! Good luck, Sky!"

The "anomaly" was between 120 and 170 miles above Earth, which was where NASA aimed me and the capsule. Everyone's expectation was reach it, gather the photos and data, and I would eventually crash into the Atlantic ocean at some astronomical speed. I put all that aside as best I could, but I thought I knew and had my head around the future.

The final preparations took place at 0400 AM Eastern Time, and Senior Tech Walsh gave me the final onboard connections check. NASA had retrofitted and squeezed in a small oxygen scrubber (fresh from testing), and some weird tubed K-rations and water for the "estimated" 10-hour flight estimate. No one joked about that being the end of the line.

Colonel Barnes locked me in, checked my cramped seat and connections to the suit one final

time. “You all set, Commander?”

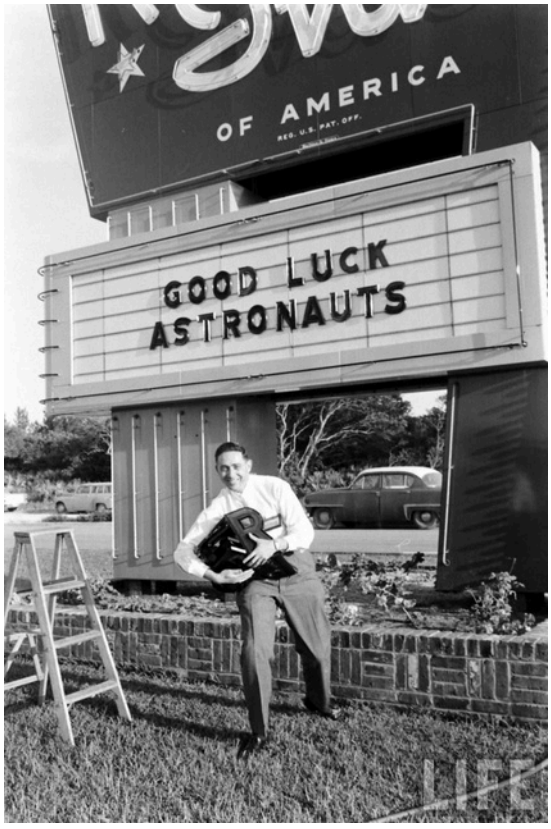
“You sure you don’t want to switch places?” I said, forcing a small laugh that died.

“This is yours, Skyler, and we’re all pulling for you,” he said, and backed out and sealed the capsule. He radioed the gantry was secure and ready. In the small window, he gave me the thumbs up…

Part Three

After an excellent liftoff from the Redstone rocket, I used small window above my head to look out, see Earth. Green, blue, floating. It was incredible to see.

NASA activated the cameras, tested them as working. My radios were silent though, all UHF and HF bands, supposedly coming from launch site Cape Canaveral, and the center of communications at Goddard Space Flight Center, Maryland.



We (me and NASA) were several minutes into the flight, I felt some kind of weight and gravity

shift. Despite not wanting to, I began to think about the end of the mission. I was not afraid of death or dying in space —I just wanted it to mean something. I would never know if they identified the anomaly, get the raw data, anything at all. A jolt in the capsule made me snap out of that reverie.

Out the small window, I saw a blue light orb shining at the anomaly location as we reached it, and then it was all around me, and the blue light changed and surrounded me too. I heard a voice in my head, closed my eyes, and the acceleration was swift, blurring everything, then just dots of light flashing behind my eyes.

“Please relax, Commander Sky,” the soft voice bloomed in my head. It was in my inner ear, and my mind, and my thoughts at the same time. I knew of telepathy, but I had never experienced it. I slipped into a kind of sleep, the last thing I recall before the arrival.

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I came awake, and was no longer in any capsule. When I opened my eyes, a tall human-like

being was speaking to my mind. It felt feminine somehow.

“Welcome, Human Sky. I have the pleasure and honor to greet you on behalf of the sentient beings of our galaxy, yours and ours.”

I lay in some prone position, no longer in my spacesuit, covered in a gown of something that shimmered in the blue light. I spoke, “Am I dead?” I said.

Something like a smile brightened her face, “Oh no, Sky —you are very much alive, and with us.

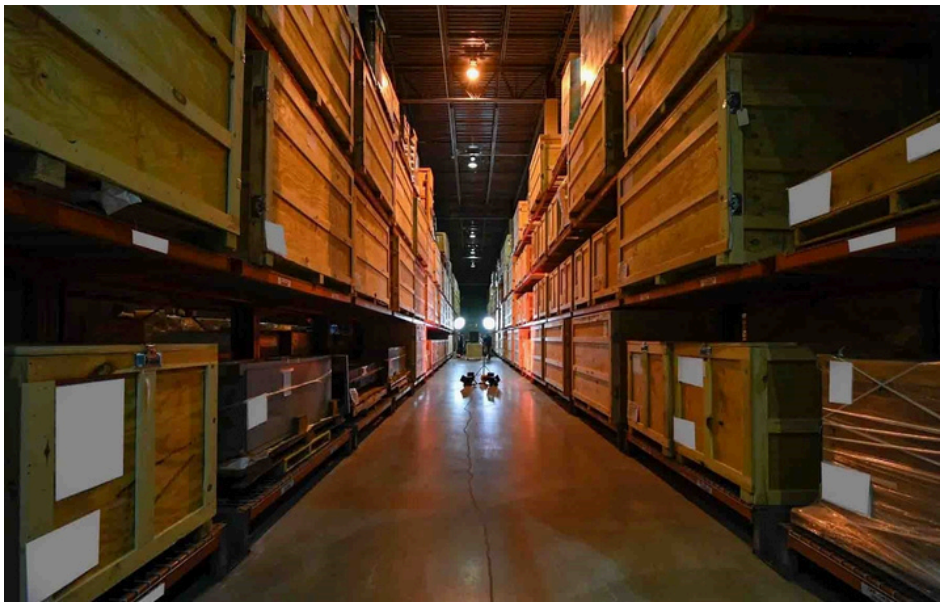
“Us?” I said.

She said softly, and it sounded like music, “We are the Gathering, of the many humanoid, sentient beings in this, our galaxy. Humanity from your ‘Earth’ will join us, in time. You are to be our Ambassador to your world and peoples.”

“In time, you will bring the good news to your fellows of humanity. We have watched, and in time, you will know that time is more fluid and different than you have imagined.” She touched my forehead, and I went away…

Epilogue - 1963

The NASA mission report for Freedom X was closed in 1963, after investigations suggested the capsule “disappeared,” and neither it nor Commander Sky were ever found again. The files were archived in the National Archives, and no one ever saw them again. Until 2024.



Epilogue - 2024

Sixty some years later, I came home to Earth, and Belle joined me. At the start of the global video conference, I stood with “her,” and looked out at the world through the camera, and told them.

“We are not alone!”

The End