

## Part II

Hope seemed to stop breathing as the cockpit fell silent, save for the sound of the engines running outside. Something struck me as being off. “Wait, if we’re in space, there shouldn’t be an atmosphere. We shouldn’t be hearing anything except maybe for vibrations in the airframe. Let me try something.” I switched off the autopilot and ran a control check. To equal parts relief and horror, the plane responded to everything as it should. I never thought I’d say these words or that they would sound so menacing, but without breaking my gaze out the window as I switched the autopilot back on, I said, “We’re still flying.”

“What are we going to do” I remain silent at this question, transfixed by what I’m looking at. “Jackson,” Hope shouts abruptly. I look over at her, finally coming back to my senses. I signal with my eyes for her to continue. “What are we going to do about this.”

“Call everyone to the front. We don’t know what that was or where we are; let’s put our heads together and talk about it.”

“Shouldn’t we tell the passengers?”

“Tell them what? That we’re trapped in interstellar space? That we’re light years away from the next obstacle? That we’ve been taken by an unknown entity into its pocket dimension for him to play around with and eventually kill? The point is, we don’t know any more about this situation than the passengers do; all we’ve had different from them is a bigger scare.”

“How was ours bigger?”

“They don’t know we lost control of the airplane.” I reached down to the pedestal to shut down the tail engine to save fuel. I looked at the altimeter and realized it was frozen at 25,000 feet. Hope called the rest of the crew to the cockpit for a meeting. I took one last look out the window, unsure if some kind of mimetic effect caused the trances I kept falling into or if it was just pure shock and disbelief at the situation. Hope and I got up from our seats when the rest of the crew arrived. They looked a little perplexed, which, in turn, unsettled me. “How are the passengers doing?” I asked.

“Pretty shaken up and a little scared that we’re going back into the wall of a hurricane or something,” the lead flight attendant said. “They might want to divert to the nearest place. Reykjavik can’t be that far away, can it?”

“Wait, you aren’t looking out the window?”

“No, we blacked them out because we didn’t want the passengers to see what was happening outside.”

“So you don’t know what’s happened either?”

“No, we don’t. We can’t just land right away and sort this out?” Hope and I looked at each other, a growing sense of terror between us that quickly spread to the cabin crew. I turned back to them, and in a dry, strained voice, I said, “Have a look for yourselves.” I opened the cockpit door to let them inside for a look out the windows. All of them immediately went pale, and their jaws hit the floor. Some of the passengers noticed that the cabin crew was gathered so tightly around the cockpit, and I responded by squeezing through the mass and closing the dividing curtains. When I got back, the crew appeared to be in a completely entranced state.

“What do you suppose we do?” Robert, the chief flight attendant, asked.

“I don’t know, but first things first, we understand why we’re here. I’ll go to the avionics bay to try to deduce what happened. Hope, Tyler, you guys are in charge until I get back. Cabin crew, keep the passengers calm and keep a lookout for anything possibly dangerous. It’s possible a sentient entity brought us here, and if it did, I don’t think it wants to talk over a plate of garlic fries and a football game. That’s just a theory, but we have to be ready for it.”

“Why are you quick to draw that conclusion?” Barbara, the juniormost flight attendant, asked.

“Let’s just say I know some people. I’ve had a history with an underground group called the SCP Foundation. They’re a society dedicated to collecting and containing anomalies. We haven’t seen one like this, but this is something they’d want to hear about if we make it out alive. I don’t have time or clearance to share much more with you, so let’s just get to work.” I sent the

cabin crew off to run their rounds as Tyler and Hope took their seats in the cockpit. I grabbed a flight attendant's PA Phone and made the hardest call of my career. "Ladies and gentlemen, this is the Captain speaking. If you've ever seen the Twilight Zone episode *The Odyssey of Flight 33*, you'd understand the loss for words that the captain of that plane was at. This one's a little different. In a moment, the flight attendants are going to reveal to you what the crew has been looking at for the past couple of minutes. If you are with a travel partner, we suggest that you lean on each other for support in every way you can and look out either side of the airplane. I guarantee what you see will shock you." I signal Buzz, the flight attendant closest to me, to clear up the windows. The reaction of the crowd to what they're seeing nearly stops my heart. I try not to break as I finish my message. "We don't know where we are, how we got here, and what kind of danger we are in, if any. The crew will be working hard for your safety and comfort as we sort out this very urgent situation. And one more thing: to make it easy for us, please remain calm."

I hung up the phone and stood there silently. Barbara was right next to me, and after a long time and a few attempts to work up the courage, but eventually asked me what I meant by the avionics bay.

"We're not supposed to access it in flight, but there's an ACARS disc in the avionics bay that will record anomalous information, usually for maintenance purposes. It will have around 10 minutes of information on it, so we don't have a lot to work with, but if we can plug it into a device that can read the information and determine any distinct events related to what brought us here, we might be able to find a way back."

"Isn't that a lot like the black boxes?"

"This is a little bit different. Black boxes are for accident investigation, but this is unique to Wilson Aerospace planes for maintenance and experimental purposes." I pulled the gun I carried on all flights out of my waistband and searched through the galley for ammunition.

When I found it and loaded the gun, Barbara watched in horror. When I cocked it, she recoiled as if I had actually fired. “What are you doing?”

“I don’t know what’s telling me to do so, but I have to be loaded before I go in there.”

“Who do you think could be down there?”

“Not who, per se, but what?” I could see the color drain from her face as I squeezed past her to go access the hatch under which the avionics bay was hidden. I removed the carpet and undid the latches to the avionics bay. It was dark down there, more so given it was like the night sky outside. I made the sign of the cross and tapped a pin that a friend had given me that I put on my tie. I grabbed the flight attendant’s phone and alerted everyone to the fact that I was entering the hole. I dropped down to the hard floor beneath. The unusually smooth ride became clear to me at that moment. I turned on my flashlight and swept it around the room. The normally soothing rumble of the engines felt suddenly ominous. I felt the engines on the wings shut down, which caused the room to fall nearly silent. I couldn’t tell if Hope and Tyler had shut down the engines to save fuel or if they had failed, but I didn’t have time to worry about that at the moment. I slowly stepped into the darkness, moving my flashlight to my right hand and drawing my gun with my left. I walked over to the shelf labeled “Aircraft Communications Addressing and Reporting System.” I heard something behind me and whipped around. My heart just about stopped, and my blood turned to ice at the sight of the creature.

It wasn’t hideous; it was actually rather beautiful. It was a humanoid figure, timid in its mannerism and a few inches shorter than my 6-and-a-half foot stature. It had paper white but very thick and healthy skin draped over a muscular frame. Its limbs were slightly out of proportion with that of a human’s, with its arms reaching down to the knees of uncannily long legs. Its face was elongated, like the snout of a dog, with its skin covering what was inside of its mouth. I didn’t want to find out, but couldn’t exactly get out of there. Suddenly the beast charged. I had lowered my gun to my side but not holstered it. I instantly fired three rounds into the creature’s face. It screamed in pain but only slowed down. It shielded its face as it regained

its composure. Knowing I had five rounds left, I waited for it to show itself again and aimed for its eyes. When I did, a disgusting white discharge spewed from the wound. It briefly recoiled before revealing its face again. It roared, and I fired another shot down its throat. It gurgled loudly and collapsed. I took the chance to flee to the hatch. As I did, two more of the creatures emerged from the computers and chased me. I climbed the ladder into the cabin where Buzz was waiting for me. I looked down and saw the vile face of one of the creatures. I fired the remaining three shots down into the hatch, hoping they didn't damage the airplane. I slammed the hatch down and locked it.

"Are you okay?"

"Well, it didn't hurt me. I'll be alright."

"You gave us quite a scare there."

"You heard that?"

"Yeah, we did. The shots startled several passengers."

"Did you hear the screams?"

"Yes, what was it you fired at?"

"I have no clue, I just know that it isn't natural. Whatever it is, it is hostile, and it attacked me. We might have a bigger problem than being stuck here."

"What's that?"

"I killed the first one, but there are at least two more." I return to the cockpit, shaken up by the experience. The crew got me a cup of soda (I really don't like hot drinks) and had me resume my place in the Captain's seat. We talked about the situation with the avionics bay, and knowing that the creatures are there, it's going to be a more challenging task harvesting the information. Hope asks if we should check other places. Tyler said we shouldn't, based on the fact that we could cause a containment breach if we were to look in the cargo hold. Hope countered that by saying that if the plane really was infested, it would help us devise a plan to retrieve the information. They turned to me for a final verdict. "It would be wise to check the

cargo hold to understand the level of danger these creatures present. The ones that attacked me never touched me, and I never saw their hands, so we don't know how dangerous they are. Currently, the largest question mark is we don't know how many there are. I'll grab Buzz and David, and we'll go down for-

"No," Hope cut me off. "We almost lost you once, and as the flight's Captain, we can't afford to risk your life again. I'm going down, and that is non-negotiable, you understand?" I looked at Tyler, who looked back with a look in his eyes that said, "I wouldn't fight her, bro."

I looked at her and the crazy look in her eyes. "Okay, but don't take a gun with you."

"Why not?"

"As much as this might be a central concern, we are in an airplane, and we are still flying. I don't want stray bullets damaging the fuselage or, worse, the airframe."

"Okay." Hope left the cockpit, leaving Tyler and me alone. I looked over at him and noticed that something seemed to be upsetting him. He was looking at a locket he must have produced when I was talking to Hope. He looked at it with glossy eyes and rubbed it with his thumb. I think about asking him but ultimately decide against it. I felt the pang of something in my chest, something I have become all too familiar with, a kind of existential loneliness. I sat and thought about my friends in the cabin. I have no idea what they must have been feeling at that moment, especially when they had a clue as to what might have been going on. I wanted to go back and talk to them to calm all of us down and was unbuckling my harness to do so when the service interphone rang to life. I picked it up, and the instant it was clear to the person on the other end that I was listening, they shouted through the line.

"Oh my god, there are hundreds of them." My blood turned to ice, and I could sense that Tyler's did as well.

"What do you want me to do?" I asked.

"Throw them off." The crew member on the other end screamed, and the interphone cut off. Without hesitation, I reached over and switched the autopilot off. I have Tyler hold the

plane steady as I put my shoulder straps on, and once I have that done, I urge him to do the same. Unsure of what to do next, I increase power to the one running engine and pull the yoke back as hard as possible. All the blood rushed out of my head, and I felt like I was going to pass out. I then remembered the story of Federal Express flight 705, and then turned the yoke full axis to the left, rolling it onto its side and then its back. Despite not knowing what is up and down in this dimension, I noticed quickly that gravity was constantly pulling us in the original direction. This meant that the inversion caused everything that wasn't secure to fly towards the ceiling. I kicked the rudder a couple of times, first to the right and then to the left. The screams ringing out from the cabin were blood-curdling. I suppressed the urge to cry, knowing how terrifying this had to be to the passengers. I rolled the plane with all it had to the right. I rolled it over once and then stopped it in a steep right bank and once again pulled as hard as I could. The turn nearly made me pass out, and after this maneuver, I leveled the plane off and switched the autopilot back on. I looked over to Tyler and asked if he was okay. "I'm all good here," he responded.

"I know it's tempting to catch your breath," I said, unbuckling my harnesses. "But we have to go help them. We don't know if they actually beat the creatures or if we shot ourselves in the foot by using that strategy." I grabbed a crash axe and left the cockpit. As was completely expected, the cabin was an absolute mess. Pillows and blankets were strewn about, along with other garbage and some spilled drinks. I took a wordless look at the chaos and continued to the back of the airplane. I walked through the first two sections dreading what I was about to see. Aside from a few people nursing minor injuries, there wasn't anything overly disturbing about each of them. That was until I got to the aftmost section of the cabin. I'm not overly sensitive to things I see, whether that be getting emotional at movies or getting sick upon seeing disturbing things, but this was just so... real. There were human remains everywhere, along with four dead bodies of the humanoid creatures.

There were crew members attending to three severely injured passengers, but that wasn't the most disturbing part. There were at least seven dead bodies of passengers and the dead bodies of Purser Patrick Delaney, Chief Flight Attendant Buzz Donaldson, and First Officer Hope McKinnon. Three more junior flight attendants were present and very overwhelmed. I'm not certified to give medical care, so I didn't know what to do. I tried desperately to find words but eventually settled on "What the hell happened?" Barbara started to cry, and another flight attendant, Luke Berry, went to comfort her. The third, James Mann, explained that as soon as Hope had dropped into the cargo hold, two of the creatures immediately jumped on her. She screamed for help, and the senior flight attendants immediately rushed aft to help her out. When they got there, five creatures had emerged from the hole and were overpowering the junior flight attendants. Pat and Buzz had run in to knock the creatures off their feet for a diversion, but they wouldn't leave Luke alone. That's when Pat grabbed the handset but mistakenly set it to PA instead of interphone, so he broadcast the desperate cry to the passengers instead of Tyler and me. This caused a mass panic in the aft portion of the aircraft. Shortly after, the maneuvers started, which saved Luke, though his leg and arm were badly injured. Buzz accidentally hit Barbara with an ax swinging for one of the creatures, which in turn slit his throat. When the plane inverted, Pat fell to the ceiling with one of the creatures, which shredded his chest as it scrambled to regain its footing, inflicting Pat with a sucking chest wound. He died seconds later. Multiple passengers were killed, though not by the creatures attacking them, but by the creatures scrambling to maintain their footing on the shifting ground. "So you're telling me that by this strategy, we made the situation worse?"

"Yes, that's exactly right." I take a moment to process the words before heading back to the front. When I get there, Flight Attendant John Wilson is waiting for the news. "Because of me, fifteen people are dead."

"How so?"

“All that death and destruction came from me flying the plane around to knock them off balance than from the creatures themselves.” Just then, something that had been nagging at me manifested as a question. “Are the creatures only after the crew?”

“I don’t know, and there’s really no way we can test that.”

“I beg to differ.” John looks at me with wide eyes as if I’ve revealed a dark secret.

“You don’t...” He trails off, barely finishing the second word.

“Listen, if we don’t try things, we’re all dead. Our only hope of getting home is in that avionics bay, and we have to send anyone we can who can get the information back without losing their life.”

“How do you know if it’s unsafe for the crew?”

“Because it attacked me!” I hissed. I promptly shuddered at the memory of seeing Hope’s emaciated body. Without another word, I went back inside the cockpit. Tyler noticed I was pretty badly shaken up. “What was it like out there?” he asked innocently.

“It was a bloodbath.” I told him the story of what happened, and he looked at me blankly. I told him I didn’t want to leave my seat again after what I had seen. He tried to sympathize with me, but I promptly cut him off, saying that the plane and everyone on board was my responsibility as Captain.

“Dude, you are not okay.”

“You think I don’t know that?” I proposed the idea that we send a crew member and a passenger down to the cargo hold to test the waters. Tyler was against this, but given that we didn’t have very much in the way of both options and fuel, we had to be decisive. Tyler relented, and we got a volunteer from the crew to go downstairs. I went back out into the cabin to talk to first-class directly. I explained the situation to them and asked for any volunteers to check out the hold. To my relief, none of my friends stood up, but rather a stranger from business class. She came forward to the galley along with the volunteer crew member, Linda McNab. I gave them each crash axe and explained that while we don’t know what the creatures are or what

they're capable of, we do know that the axe can kill them. The passenger asked why we weren't using guns. I had to explain that I didn't want to pepper a bunch of holes in the airplane by firing a ton of bullets inside, but if one had to kill a creature point blank, a gun would be an effective way to kill one.

I said a prayer over them before they left. They went to the back of the plane and disappeared behind the dividing curtain between first and business class. I went back to the cockpit to wait for the results. In a note the NTSB would later present to me, the passenger recorded her expedition into the cargo hold.

It read: when we went down inside, it was pitch black. I waited for the crew member to follow me down into the hole. It was quiet and suspiciously so. He told me that we were down here only for a minute to wait and see if anything happened. Something swiped past my back, which caused me to freak out a little bit. I ran forward to where the flight attendant was. She panicked, grabbed me, and asked if I was okay. I shrugged it off and asked if we could leave. Just then, I heard something deep in the cargo area. It sounded like my mother's voice. When I told that to the flight attendant, she immediately raised his ax into a fighting position. I asked her why, and she told her to get closer. I saw a flash of ultraviolet light roll across her face. She said, "Hi, honey," before I saw an ax split open her skull. I jumped back immediately. She pulled out the ax and hacked at her neck and chest. I asked what he was doing. She said, "That's only for the Captain to know." She led me back to my seat and got the Captain. As they were talking, another flight attendant asked to look at my back under the shirt at the supposed wound. They called Jackson over, who objected at first, but upon glancing my back, came in for a closer look. All he said was, "Damn, they're good." End of transcript.

When they came back, Linda told me about their encounter. While I won't recap the events of what happened, given that the passenger did that for me, I will tell you what we learned. They can read minds through physical contact, and they do have shapeshifting capabilities. There were several questions remaining, like what the creatures wanted, did they

have any targets, and who was that target, if any. I started going back to the cockpit when Barbara called me over to look at the passenger's back. "I told you already, I'm not medically certified, why do you need... me..." I trailed off as I saw her back. I walked over in silence. When I got to her, I was completely awestruck. I reached out with my fingers and brushed over where the claw supposedly swiped her back. "You said it swiped you?"

"Yeah, why?"

"Damn, they're good." I ran back to the cockpit, where the surviving crew put their heads together again. We were questioned about how we knew that they could actually read minds. I responded that it's the only logical conclusion for why a creature would touch someone without the intent to kill and how it would have manifested as the person's mother, or at least what she claimed was her mother. "Whatever it means, it's not good news for us. We need to find out how we got here so we can at least make an effort to get back."

"How do you think we're supposed to get that information, though? The avionics bay is infested, you've already almost died once, and we're not letting you go down there again."

"Who do you think we send down there, then?"