

## The Monster

My daily logbook entry includes the details of the crash. My location is not on the few charts I have available for this sector, for information of any external region from home comes at a dear price. None can afford the premium associated with this mode of travel. For this reason, I am not assured that my charts are even correct; they are the astronomer's best guess, a hypothesis if you will. Corrections were to be one of the secondary functions of my trip. Unfortunately, I find myself unable to conduct even my primary function, let alone any of the secondary ones. Rescue is not an option. I knew this at the time of my enlistment. The investors pinned the entirety of their scant resources constructing *The Penultimate*. My government diverted equally dear capital in my training. Both projects exceeded budgets in terms of time and costs. If I were to be successful, and could prove it, my people might sacrifice all they had to duplicate my accomplishment. I say sacrifice only because those who would fund the next vessel would not live to see its only voyage.

But now, that one outcome has little chance of reality. I am low on power, unable to communicate, and dangerously short on supplies. However, with a small amount of luck, and a little time, I may be able to sustain myself and repair my ship. Not for another flight. No, that is now only a wish. I may be able to repair *The Penultimate* as a forward observation post and correct the inaccuracies in my star charts. All of the previous is moot if this world proves inhospitable or void of the provisions I desperately require.

None of my computers function; whether from lack of power or damage is of little significance. I trained twice the minimum time allotments for this very contingency. I function well in low-tech mode. Perhaps this was the single edge I had over my competitors at the time I was chosen. That is why the construction crews tailored *The Penultimate* specifically for me; one single occupant. Built for speed and exploration, *The Penultimate* proved itself in all the mock trials and duplicated exploration within my home system in a mere fraction of the time as its predecessors. The helm control responded at my touch and the guidance system kept a true course. This ship began its lifetime designed as the single best hope for my people, the single best hope for my world, and as my last home; but I now think it will end as my tomb.

Prophetic words as I regain consciousness and gasp. *The Penultimate* must be venting atmosphere. Without internal sensors, I will have to locate the damage to the hull and make repairs. Time is of the essence. My breathing is as difficult as it is at high altitude. I decide to briefly discharge a fire extinguisher into the cabin and track the movement of the dust cloud. It is expensive to contaminate the computer consoles with a fire retardant, but I have no choice. The results of this action may corrode the terminals, but it will permit respiration. I have consigned myself to the former in hopes of bettering the latter. With gel-sealant packs in hand, I patiently await the drifting of the cloud to the hull breach. Fortunately, today there is but one. The future may reveal more, but today I am lucky. Without finding the breach, I would have to don my EVAC suit, wasting the pressurized air I will never be able to refill.

I may have to don the EVAC anyway. For, in searching for the venting atmosphere, I found temperature variations on the hull. This means the insulation is failing. This means my heat is escaping through the conductive nature of the alloyed metal hull plating. Without a new

repair, I am doomed. I have no power to provide heat, no internal sensors to diagnose the extent of the damage, and insufficient resources to halt the progress. Presently, I can be reactive and await the inevitable by compartmentalizing myself into smaller and smaller spaces. Or, I can be proactive, don the EVAC suit, and exit *The Penultimate*, gambling everything. I did not get this far in my life waiting for death to find me. With a few food-packs and first-aid kit internal to my suit, as well as a sidearm external to my suit, I face my destiny. The airlock is damaged. If the external atmosphere is toxic, leaving the ship means contaminating the ship. I will have no haven to return to. I take a chance by overriding the airlock safety and engaging the manual controls.

Whatever the external atmosphere is, it is fierce. The velocity surpasses that of my homeworld by a factor of three, maybe four. If this is a storm, and it subsides soon, my efforts may not be in vain. If not, then I must redouble my efforts for half the results. Space travel is always about cost vs benefits. Today is about the costs. I have yet to witness the benefits.

Whatever the external atmosphere is, it is cold. My EVAC suit is equipped with a heat unit, currently set on maximum. Even then, I feel the cold penetrating its mediocre protection. This power draw reduces my options. Whatever I can accomplish, I must accomplish quickly.

And I cannot accomplish much. For in the plummet to the surface of this (planet? asteroid? comet?), whatever this is, *The Penultimate* found a double-edged sword. Surrounded on all sides of my ship was a Monster. Void of color and elusive to corporeal encounters, the Monster cushioned the impact of the crash, but began to engulf *The Penultimate* on three sides. I never saw a being similar to that I see now. It moved with the storm as if to conserve energy. It

failed to respond to external stimuli when I shot at it or yelled at it. The Monster progressed inadequately to its volume and inappropriately to its mass. I know it had mass for I heard the straining the hull when the Monster shifted its weight from one side to another. Was this reconnaissance? Was the Monster low on power? Even so, my ship was under attack and I could do nothing to resist. Fortunately, the Monster did not coordinate his movement as a skilled champion would. This Monster was clumsy or curious or both. He advanced, then retreated, then advanced again. It reminded me of tidal actions during a mild storm; no longer predictable, but still extremely dangerous if in close proximity to its impending rage.

The Monster's main weapon seemed to be its bulk, for it was everywhere. And paradoxically, it was nowhere. The Monster defied geometric description. I saw no bone structure, no mouth, no appendages, and no eyes. If it breathed, its volume fell below that of the raging winds that accompanied it. The Monster had no definite volume or density. Some parts authorized visual penetration, revealing no definite form. Other parts had magnified density and intense hardness that defied my limited sight. By vision only, the Monster did what he wanted, when he wanted, and how he wanted. Being impervious to all my weapons, the Monster ignored me and resumed his scrutiny (or attack) on my ship.

The Monster's secondary weapon was a field dampening ability to reduce all sound to nothing. I yelled at the Monster, expecting an answer in return. What I heard was nothing. Not even an echo. I fired another shot from my sidearm confirming what I remembered from the first shot. The report was nearly silent. So was my yelling. Neither sound travelled the expected distance or with the expected velocity. As if the Monster fed off sound energy, I denied him any additional fuel and remained silent. My gauges read 50% power and 65% breathable air. For a

few moments, I began only observing the Monster. I would exploit any flaw or weakness I discovered. What kind of life was he? Was this his natural habitat? Was it the last of its kind? Was it adolescent or mature? How did it feed?

I might have asked questions forever if not for my EVAC suit. Warning: 40% power reserves remaining. It snapped me back to full attention. And my full attention demanded that I notice the Monster had barricaded itself over the air-lock hatch, preventing my return to *The Penultimate*. For even if I wanted to die with dignity, I could not. The Monster's larceny removed that possibility.

With little choice and low power, I decided on a frontal assault. I removed a knife from an external pocket and ran toward the Monster silently. I say toward when I really mean through. The indefinite form of the Monster meant, as I approached my ship, I had to step, then trudge through its enveloping thickness. Each step expended more energy than necessary. By the time I reached its thickest point, I plunged at its center in a suicidal rage. Do not ask what I expected to happen. I reminded myself of the benefits of being proactive and not reactive. It was comforting, lying on the Monster's bulk, resting from a brutal and useless assault. Actually, it was very comforting lying where I fell. The thickness of the Monster and its relative softness enabled my easy recovery. Then my easy sleep. A very peaceful, quiet, slumber.

And a harsh return to reality. My gauges now read 20% power and 20% breathable air. How did this happen? All I did was close my eyes for a single moment and I lost more than half of my remaining power reserves. And I felt colder. Colder than my initial sojourn. Colder than any encounter with the Monster. My chronographer must be inaccurate. I could not have been

asleep for that period of time. Not under these conditions. Never! I am stronger than that. I quickly arose and found the Monster also fast asleep. It moved not. It roared not. And maybe that was the essence of its physiology. Maybe the Monster derived power from the storm. Maybe the Monster was parasitic on others, or symbiotic with its environment. Simply fascinating. An entirely new form of life and I have not the tools or the time to study it further. What I have is a choice to make. I returned my attention to the airlock hatch and found the bulk of the Monster blocking my access to this access. If I wanted in, I had to work to elude the Monster without awakening it. If successful, I would spend the remaining moments of my life in quiet solitude, slowly succumbing to the bleakness of this crash-site. I would die alone, but I would die at my post.

Or, I could forgo the inevitable and achieve what my people sent me to achieve. I am the soul of *The Penultimate*; built for speed, built for exploration. Speed was no longer an option, but exploration was. Such an easy choice. Some might say it builds characters. I say it reveals character. Always proactive. That was my motto.

So I said my goodbyes to *The Penultimate* and parted ways. She was a fine ship; the best my world could offer. In a different time, *The Penultimate* would make history, instead of be history. I walked away in silence, through the external periphery of the Monster. Soon I found an outcropping of exposed rocks and listened to my EVAC suit begin its countdown of its final power reserves. I bought a few extra seconds by disconnecting the verbal component of the warning. The sky on this world is homogeneous. It is gray and very bleak. This cannot be a rogue planet, but I cannot find where to search for its star. I find it more difficult to breathe and the cold encroaches upon my now shortened life. I only wish I had a change of circumstance.

Andy Betz

One less problem to assault. One better star-chart to follow. Or even one less crash. But as far as the Monster is concerned, he may devour my ship, but he will not eat me. No one will ever know who I was or where I came from, but Ginne, crew of one, on the ship of exploration, *The Penultimate*, made his mark, obeyed his orders, and accomplished his mission despite his circumstances. I know the EVAC suit will record my thoughts for posterity, long after I am gone.

The scientists could have asked each other who he was or where he came from. Instead, after the autopsy of the body, they began the autopsy of the clothing. The spacesuit looked innocuous enough, but looks were deceiving. The power transfer took the better part of a day and the translation of the journal entries another two days. In the end, they deciphered only that the stranger had encountered a Monster that destroyed his spaceship. Found open to the elements and buried in snow on three sides, the ship with its alien technology became a national security asset, classified, then packaged for transport to some government lab for the scrutiny it required. The spacesuit followed. The body, while exposed to the harsh elements of a Mt. McKinley blizzard, became the staple of all alien research. But the translations of the journal entries puzzled scientists for years to come. Why didn't the alien remain in his ship and dig his way out of the snow at the conclusion of the storm? Rarely do these last more than a single day. Whatever the Monster was, the snow would have protected the ship by hiding it and masking the sounds of its internal power supplies. From the amount of snow covering the air-lock hatch, no Earth creature could have removed it all to enter. It just seems the stranger was afraid of the snow. Imagine that, afraid of snow.