

⚡ **One Way to Mars**

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Smashwords Edition

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Chapter 1

'Asshole, asshole.'

Andrew Foreman felt the tugging on his arms, and shook his head.

'Asshole, asshole.'

There was a smell of something smouldering, of electrical wiring melting and fusing together. There were other smells, too. None of them nice. Foreman dared to open his eyes. Monkley was staring right back at him.

'Asshole,' said Monkley. It was one of his favourite words.

'Right. But apart from that, are you pleased to see me?'

Foreman tried moving his limbs; cautiously at first. Nothing seemed broken. Bruised, certainly, battered, definitely. Understandably. That was to be expected. Still being alive, now that was a surprise. Monkley passed him his helmet. Foreman ignored the pain in his shoulder and secured the helmet. Struggling to his feet, Foreman felt light-headed, and had to lean against the wall to remain upright. Once his vision had cleared, he passed his hand over the sensor to open the door. Nothing happened. He tried again. Still nothing. He hammered on the door.

'Hey! You guys. How about letting me out of here?' Nothing. 'Phillips? Mauler? Sanders? Hello. Anybody?'

The lack of response worried him. The smell of the fried electronics terrified him. The ship, what was left of it, was about to blow. He hammered hard on the door, simultaneously waving his palm in front of the sensor. Then he tried a coordinated assault on the door, kicking and hammering at the same time. Nothing. He stepped back. He stared at the door as if by mental control, he could will the thing open. Apparently not.

'Step back,' he told Monkley.

Monkley jumped up onto his cage, wondering what Foreman was going to try next.

'Asshole.'

'Yeah? Like you got any bright ideas?'

He charged the door. The fact it was a sliding door, and therefore not conducive to being rammed open, didn't deter him. He bounced off the door and landed on his backside on the floor.

'Asshole.'

There was a groaning sound and the door unjammed itself, opening a few inches.

'Yeah? An asshole, am I?' He got up. 'Well, you just remember it was this asshole who got us out of here.' He pulled on the partially opened door, but it wasn't giving in without a fight. 'Don't just sit there, you nut-job. Give me a hand here.'

Monkley obliged by setting his three foot body below Foreman's and between them they applied all the force they could. Ignoring the possible hernia he could give himself, Foreman gave the job his all, as did Monkley. Something gave, and thankfully, it didn't involve tearing of muscles. It was only a few more inches, but it was enough. Monkley got through the gap easily, Foreman's face turned purple at the effort to squeeze his body through the gap. Suddenly, he was free.

'Shit!'

Three bodies lay on the floor. Commander Ashley Phillips, Captain Donna Sanders, Science Officer Elizabeth Mauler, were twisted up into impossible contortions. Impossible for living people, anyway. There was a substantial amount of blood on their un-helmeted heads from where they had collided with the unforgiving and unyielding alloy shell of the ship. Foreman gave them a quick and unqualified check, but even to an untrained layman they were clearly dead.

'Shit!.'

They had been caught out by the suddenness of the dramatic and catastrophic failure of the ship's propulsion systems. After seven months of confinement on the cramped ship, they were all excited to be finally at the end of their journey, and eager to get off the ship. Phillips had just

given the order to put on helmets and belt up for landing, when there was a slight bang and they fell like a stone. Foreman had just secured Monkley in the harness in his cage, when down they went. He had tried to return to the others in the main cockpit and his seat, when they began spinning out of control. The 'G' forces were Foreman's final undoing, and he was out for the count until Monkley woke him. How the GenMoP, Genetically Modified Primate, had freed himself, wasn't something Foreman had time to concern himself with. Not when several fires started simultaneously.

Monkley started to panic, being after all, just a glorified chimpanzee. Turning his air supply on, Foreman opened the airlock and attacked the main exit hatch. That side of the ship had sustained minimal damage, so the hatch opened with a hiss as the pressure equalised. Monkley beat him outside, and Foreman jumped down, not bothering with the steps, landing heavily on the soft sand just a few feet below. Monkley jumped up on his shoulders, and wrapped his arms about his neck, and Foreman began running. He made fifteen paces before the ship exploded behind them, sending them crashing to the ground.

'Asshole.'

'That's gratitude for saving your hairy backside.' Wiping the sand off his visor, he turned to look back at the ship. 'Right. Cremation it is, then.'

The ensuing explosions reduced the small craft to a tangled shell within minutes. He sat with Monkley for a while, and with a sigh, got to his feet. One thing they didn't have the luxury of was time. They had about twenty three hours of suited oxygen each before they would be as dead as the others. Only three humans had died on Mars, and Foreman didn't want the dubious honour of being the fourth. They had one shot at surviving, and one only. Find the base.

It looked hopeless. They might as well have been in the Sahara desert as far as he could see. Ahead of them was a large dune. From the summit they could get a clear view for miles.

'Come on, Monkley.'

Holding Monkley's hand, they climbed the dune. When they reached the top, they scanned the horizon.

'Nice beach. I guess the tide must be out.'

'Thirsty.'

'You and me both. Sorry, pal. We know there are pockets of what we call water here and there, but we'd need to dig one hell of a hole to get at it. The little ice caps are mostly frozen carbon dioxide with more than a dash of acid. Not recommended. We gotta find the base or...We gotta find the base.'

Wishing he had paid more attention, Foreman scanned the horizon. He knew the planet was smaller than Earth, and the lower gravity meant he weighed less than half of what he would on Earth. At least that made it easier to make some distance.

'Ah. Now. See that? Biggest damn mountain in the solar system. I mean huge. Now. The base is less than fifty miles away from there. I guess we might as well head that way.'

'Okay.'

Chapter 2

Conserving energy, neither said much. Monkley had a vocabulary of around five hundred words, but Commander Phillips had seen fit to expand on that on the journey, adding several expletives to the young GenMop's repertoire. As Monkley's keeper and trainer, Foreman had politely asked Phillips on numerous occasions to desist the practice, but to no avail. Soon, all humans were collectively known as assholes.

The Martian day, roughly the same as Earth days in duration, was turning into night. Although the suits would spare them from most of the effects of the freezing temperatures, Foreman had no desire to test them any more than necessary. After all, he thought. He'd trusted the ship, and look what happened to that.

'Are we there, yet?'

It was something Monkley asked every twenty or so minutes. Foreman noticed the little guy was getting progressively weaker each time he asked. Eventually, Monkley sat down in the red iron oxide, exhausted.

'Come on, pal. Stay here, we die.'

Monkley didn't seem overly concerned. It was if he had faced the question of his own mortality, and dying seemed a preferable option to him than the continuing trudge through the soft red sandy dirt. They had walked for nine straight hours, and although the landmark of Olympus Mons mountain seemed so many miles away, Foreman had no intention of just sitting down to wait for death. He did sit, however. He wrapped his arm about Monkley. Those big trusting brown eyes stared up at him. They had been together four years, ever since the Genmop had been created. It was the only reason Foreman had been allowed on the trip in the first place. The Genmops were part of a program to create a more expendable alternative to humans. Capable of understanding many commands, more intelligent than the smartest of dogs, they could be easily trained to perform basic tasks. The artificial voice box was a vast improvement on the chimp's original, giving him greater range of sounds and expression. It had been Foreman who had worked with him to master speech.

The purpose of the trip was, amongst others, to do the essential maintenance on the base, make modifications to the automatic plant and train Monkley to look after the place during human absence. Depending on how well Monkley adapted and performed, he would be left behind to run the place until the humans returned a couple of years later to establish a colony. That had been the part Foreman was least comfortable about. He loved the little guy, but had promised to act in a mature and responsible way when the time came to leave. He had assured the brass he could and would do it. Now, it wasn't even an option.

Above them, in the dust laden night sky, were two tiny moons, Phobos, twice the size and much closer than Deimos, twinkling star-like above them. Deimos was nowhere to be seen. They rested a few minutes more, and then Foreman forced his thirty eight year old body onto his feet.

'Come on, Monkely.' Monkely didn't move. 'I'm not leaving you, pal. Come on. On my back.'

Monkley rolled over onto his feet and jumped up on Foreman's back. The total sixty pounds felt more like a ton, even with the reduced gravity. With the mountain as a guide, they pressed onwards, until Foreman could go no more. He dropped to his knees, will power gone not long after the last of his strength expired. Twenty two hours had passed since the crash. Foreman let the darkness of the Martian night envelope him, draining the last of the air supply as his dried up rasping breathing battled with his will to survive, waiting for the inevitable.

Chapter 3

How long Foreman had been out, was hard to judge. Once again, he was surprised to find himself still alive. Breathing was difficult, and when he looked at the gauge, the reading was well in the red zone.

'Monkley?'

When he got no reply, he rolled over onto his belly. In front of him, literally within reach, was something solid. Rock? He tapped it. It made a hollow sound. Not rock. The base. There had been no sign of it just before he had passed out, so how...? Little Monkley was lying face down in the dirt, like a large rag doll in a space suit. Foreman used the smooth wall of the base to haul himself upright. The effort was almost enough to have him dropping right back down again. Fighting to take in the last of the dregs of air, he managed to turn around. There were drag marks in the sand, where Monkley had pulled him along. The little guy had given his all to save him. Dropping to his knees, Foreman shook Monkley.

'Hey, pal. Monkley? Can you hear me?'

Monkley lay lifeless, his arms limp to the touch. The air gauge read zero. Foreman looked at the cream coloured exterior of the base. He knew there were two entrances, one regular man-size door, and huge doors for vehicular access. On this side were neither. Grabbing Monkley by the arms, he pulled him up and held him in his arms. There was no sign of life in the GenMop. Staggering around the side of the building, Foreman twice collapsed to his knees and as a last resort, dragged Monkley along as Monkley had dragged him. And there it was. The man-sized entrance. He needed no key, just to press the green button.

Still on his knees, he reached up. Lack of oxygen had almost finished him. He had blurred double vision, and he couldn't remember his own name, let alone why he was there. Something told him through the nightmare that the green button meant something.

'You can do this, For...For...Foreman.' He smacked the button. Nothing happened. He smacked it again. 'Open, you useless piece of ...'

There was a hiss. The door opened. With his body screaming at him to stop, he got hold of Monkley's arm and dragged him into the airlock. Now he had to think hard. He had to do something. What the hell was it? He stared out at the Martian night sky. Oh, yeah. They were on Mars. He pushed the button to close the outside door of the airlock. Why were they in this strange dark little room? He couldn't think. A voice inside his helmet was screaming at him, a voice so impossibly far away, yelling at him. He couldn't make out what it was saying to him.

'Stop shouting at me,' he pleaded. He fell backwards, and his head struck the inner airlock button. A light came on. Pretty, he thought. Another light. One by one, dozens of lights lit up the cavernous base dome. It went beyond effort, but with a twist, his helmet was off. Oxygen rich air, un-breathed by anything in years, washed over him, like the elixir of life. He took a couple of sweet lungs full and he knew no air on any planet ever tasted so good. With his brain clearing, he took off Monkley's helmet.

'Come on, pal. Don't give up on me now.'

He opened one of Monkley's eyes. It looked dull and lifeless. He pulled off the suit and put his ear to Monkley's chest. Was that a heartbeat? 'Monkley. Come on.'

They had all been given basic first aid and CPR training. Foreman went to work on Monkley, pressing down hard on his chest. 'Come on, pal. I need you.'

There was a gasp and Monkley's eyes opened. He panted for air, trying to get the oxygen into his lungs. The rapid breathing slowed down, and his head rolled from side to side. Then his breathing became stable. He looked at Foreman.

'Are we there, yet?'

Foreman laughed so loud it echoed throughout the base. 'Yeah, pal. Thanks to you.'

Chapter 4

In the sickbay, Foreman gave small sips of water to Monkley. The GenMop sipped steadily, gradually recovering from his ordeal.

'I've found the food and we've got plenty. Hungry?'

'Hungry.'

'Me, too. Come on.'

Monkley and Foreman walked hand in hand out of the sickbay.

'I gotta hand it to those geeks. They got some things right.'

Taking care of Monkley for the first hour had meant little more than a quick whistle-stop tour of the base. He'd just finished High School when President Wilberforce Williams had announced that under his administration, the adventure with space travel was going up a couple of notches. The Senate had narrowly agreed and although the budget had been trimmed back, manned expeditions to Mars, with a view to establish a base, using international cooperation with any other nation willing to pitch in, got under way. By the time Foreman was in his final year of veterinarian college and Williams had been voted in for his second term, the base was established. That the first manned landing on Mars was timed just prior to the election was merely a coincidence, the White House insisted, fooled nobody. Williams still romped home.

Foreman's father had served in the air force, and his love of all things flying was infectious. Finding himself involved in the GenMop experiment, Foreman was number two in the team coordinating GenMop training for the International Space Federation. By the time the base was at an almost self sustaining stage, it had been agreed the next mission to Mars would be the first real introduction of a GenMop to the base. Professor Alison Cartwright, Foreman's boss, was close to retirement, and of failing health. Unmarried, Foreman was considered the natural candidate for the job of looking after Monkley. They had bonded well and Foreman had trained the animal to an exceptionally high degree of ability. Of all the GenMop's, Monkley seemed the brightest and most verbally gifted.

Foreman had at first declined the offer, and it took a visit from his congressman to persuade him his state would perhaps not look too kindly on him turning down the opportunity to be their first astronaut. Also, that Sam Goldsack was a long time friend of his dad's wasn't to be taken lightly.

'Shit, Andy. All ya gotta do is baby sit a damned monkey. You ain't driving the damned bus, for God's sake.'

'Monkley isn't a monkey, sir. He's a genetically engineered primate from chimpanzee genes.'

'Son. I don't give a shit if he's King Kong's direct descendent. He's going to Mars, and so the hell are you. Get used to it.'

The base, deliberately left unnamed so as not to cause any nation to be snubbed or affronted, was one hundred and fifty feet long, one hundred feet wide and fifty feet high. The structure had been fashioned out of Luxotral, a material conceived and developed for the base because of its incredible strength to weight ratio. Once production was under way, Luxotral was quickly taken up by industry and because it used a fusion of recyclable plastics and common silicon making it relatively inexpensive, it soon found thousands of uses. Complete houses were made from it, and because everybody wanted to live in something used on Mars, a building boom made the entire economy of Earth take off. Everyone was making so much money, people forgot to fight each other. It was a good time to be a human being.

The base sections were constructed on Earth's moon and towed to Mars in three huge containers in a convoy to supply the project. Whole new industries blossomed. It took three more years to construct the base, one year to locate and drill deep enough to find water, which, although too tainted in minerals and far too acidic to drink neat, was at least treatable to be usable.

The base was intended to be one of many more units capable of running semi-automatically, constantly filtering and neutralising the water. As much as possible, the scientists mimicked nature

and by powering everything by solar energy, letting carefully selected plants create oxygen and food, paradise was formed. And although there were no shortage of volunteers to people the base, it had been decided that GenMops would be created to maintain the bases long term, with a view to gradually explore the galaxy with the creatures, minimising human risk.

The debates around that went into the far reaches of philosophical discussion, split largely into two camps, one erring on the side of caution, and of the opinion that the GenMops were an acceptable bridge between robots and humans. The more vociferous faction were adamant that humans were adventurous creatures and taking risk was an essential part of the human condition. Many a bar-room brawl was started over an innocent, casual comment regarding the pros and cons of man versus GenMop, usually ending in a draw where the combatants eventually forgot what the hell they were fighting about and got on with the serious business of drinking.

Space Brass were equally divided, but, in the end, and to some degree influenced in no small part, by the astronomical sums already spent so far on creating the GenMoPs, “and what the hell would we do with the little buggers if we didn't send them off into space?” GenMoPs won the day.

'Oooh!' said Monkley.

'Kinda neat, yeah?'

'Oooh!'

When Monkley was particularly fascinated by something, “Oooh!” was his usual reaction. The fantastic diversity of plant life in the base was staggering. Mostly tropical and subtropical plants, chosen for fast growth and their oxygen creating abilities; many fruit trees filled one complete side of the base. Foreman counted more than thirty different assorted fruit trees, mostly full of luscious fruit.

'Knock yourself out, pal.'

Monkley, free at last of space suit and undergarments, went into chimp overdrive and raced up the nearest tree. A banana tree. Making himself comfortable in the fork of a branch, Monkley helped himself.

'Hey. How about one for me?' Monkley threw a banana skin down at him hitting him in the face. 'Thanks a bunch, pal.'

Monkley laughed and whooped. Foreman gathered up a selection of fruit and sat on the bank of the reservoir of continuously circulating water. A man-made waterfall, contrived to look like the real thing, splashed continuously into the large deep pool. He knew it had been hotly debated about introducing some bird and aquatic life, but each answer only threw up a dozen more questions. Yes, one day, but lets think it through first, okay? Foreman pictured himself by the side of the pool, pole and line in hand, catching his dinner. Not on this trip.

Separate from the main pool, was a much smaller pool. It too had a small waterfall. Completely surrounded by lush ferns and bushes, it was a perfect hideaway soak pool. 'Oh, yeah!'

Stripping off his one piece undergarment, he tested the water with his big toe. Perfect. He jumped in, letting the purified water cover him. Coming up for air, he lay on his back and floated.

'I really should phone home,' he told himself. 'Hey. Monkley. Get your stinky ass down here. You need a bath, too.' As he expected, it went suddenly quiet. 'Monkley. Unless you want to spend the night in the airlock, you get down here this minute.' A banana hitting him on his head was Monkley's response. 'You got five seconds to get down here, or I mean it. Airlock.'

There was a rustling of the undergrowth and a serious faced Monkley poked his head out.

'It's nice. Come on. It'll do you good.'

'Water.'

'Yeah. Bathwater. Look. Be thankful I'm too tired to go find soap. In. Now.'

Monkley shuffled to the edge of the pool. Foreman reached out for his hand, but Monkley had other ideas, scooping up water and splashing him in the face. Howling with laughter, he jumped up and down, doing a back-flip for good measure.

'Okay, pal. Come on.'

Monkley eased himself into the pool, draping one wet hairy arm around Foreman.

'See? Nice.'

'Nice.'

They lay together in the peaceful oasis, thankful to be alive.

'I never did say thanks, Monkely. You saved my hide out there. Thanks pal.'

'Happy now.'

'You and me both, pal. Look. It's been one hell of a day. Time for bed. I gotta try and call home, so come on, let's get you dried off.'

Hand in hand they went to the quarters at one end of the base. There were six compact single bed units, a bathroom, a kitchen, small communal sitting area, and the communications room.

Foreman found a couple of towels and handed Monkley one.

'Do you want your own room?'

'Out,' said Monkley, pointing at the tiny jungle.

'Yeah. Why the hell not? Go for it, pal.'

Foreman watched his hairy friend run out into the trees. He knew there was nothing dangerous out there, apart from possible indigestion from over eating. Finding a clean singlet and briefs, he dressed and went into the radio room. With only the basic understanding of how it worked, he flicked switches and twiddled knobs. Things lit up and strange whistling noises screeched out of the speakers.

'Hi. Hello? Hello? Anybody home?' Nothing. 'Hi. This is Andrew Foreman. If you can hear this, I have to tell you we had something of an incident. The ships gone and all but me and Monkley are...dead. Shit. Okay. I know it could take a few minutes to answer, so I'll just keep talking. No. I need to rest. I'll try again in the morning. Over.'

Leaving the radio on, he shuffled off to find the nearest bed.

Chapter 5

It was the smell of the coffee that woke Foreman up.

'Hello,' said Monkley, passing him the mug.

'Hey! You, pal, are a real gentleman. Thanks.' He sipped the coffee. 'Perfect. How are you this morning?'

'Happy.'

When it came to words, Monkley was a one size fits all kinda chap.

'We're alive, which is the main thing. We should do something, you know, about our buddies. Mark their passing, somehow. I'll think of something.'

He went to the bathroom and ran the shower. He knew all the water would be filtered and sterilised. It was the same for any waste water. Solids would end up being used as fertiliser for the plants. Nothing was ever wasted in a facility like the base. Drying himself off, he found a coverall that fitted. The kitchen had a storeroom filled with enough vacuum packed food to feed four people for a year. Maybe not the finest dining experience, but nutritious and sustaining. Finding some tomato filled dough based thing, he zapped it in the microwave and sat at the table to eat. The meal was okay. Adequate. It would keep him alive. Another coffee hit the spot.

He left the kitchen after washing up his coffee mug, and went out to try the radio again. With his mind rested, he figured he stood a better chance of making contact. After half an hour of nothing but static, he gave it up.

'Hey, Monkley. Where the hell are you?'

There was a rustling as Monkley bounded athletically from branch to branch, landing perfectly by his side.

'Are you going to dress today?'

Monkley shook his head. 'Happy.'

'Fair enough. I tried calling Earth. I didn't get very far. You and I still have a job to do, you know? We gotta check out the systems, make sure it's all in good order. You need to stick by me, learn a bit. We have to go to the control room. Come on.'

The nerve centre of the base was at the far end of the accommodation units. A light came on as they stepped inside.

'Ah! This isn't good, pal.' He knew he had left the radio on. Now, however, it wasn't lit up. 'Probably a loose connection.'

Monkley jumped up onto the bench and watched Foreman at work. Checking the cables and power supply, he determined the problem, if there was one, was with the radio itself. 'Maybe its on some sort of timer. Yeah. Makes sense. Conserving power.'

He flicked every switch, turned every knob, poked all the buttons. Nothing. 'Gotta be some kinda manual for the damn thing.'

Monkley was holding a thick instruction manual in his hairy hands, turning the pages. This would have been impressive, had it not been upside down.

'You ain't fooling nobody, pal. Hand it over.' Monkley passed it to him. 'Shit! This is ridiculous,' he said feeling the weight. 'You make yourself useful and make me a coffee while I get my head around this.'

Monkley jumped down and ran out of the room as Foreman made himself comfortable in a chair, his feet up on the bench. Five minutes later, Monkley returned with the coffee in one hand and a banana in the other. Jumping back up on the bench, he ate the banana as Foreman studied the manual. 'I got to page ninety seven and it still ain't told me how to turn the damn thing on. What is it with geeks? They got this peculiar way about them, using a thousand incomprehensible words when one simple word would do.'

He tossed the manual on the bench and stared at the radio. Despite the technical ramblings of the manual, it looked quite basic in design. It served two purposes, he knew. Internal base

communication including with anyone outside performing missions, and communication with either Earth, or anyone on their way from Earth. That was it. It would of course, ordinarily be operated by an expert, but the expert was Science Officer Elizabeth Mauler. She'd have had the thing fired up and dancing the bossanova in seconds. Mauler being dead was a huge obstacle in her being able to do that, however.

'I need a crap,' said Foreman.

On his way to the bathroom, he marvelled at the base. He was impressed with its simplicity. One huge Luxotral construction, self supporting with no internal pillars, capable of withstanding small meteor collisions. Not that that was likely. Mars had two distinct areas, one a heavily pockmarked battered side, ravished by time and meteor bombardment, and the rest of it, smooth and relatively unblemished. Nobody really knew why that was. The base site had been chosen using the Olympus Mons mountain as a marker. Near the equator, surrounded by a vast crater, the extinct volcano measured an impressive eighteen miles in height. The bordering plateau was where the bore for the water had been drilled. Impervious pipes made of Luxotral were used to get the water to the base under natural pressure. The people building all this would have tossed the geek instruction manuals into the trash and just got on with the job.

Not one ounce of material had been wasted. There was nothing used in the project that didn't need to be there, and considering it was a joint effort between many nations, it all went amazingly well. The toilet was a self cleaning, self flushing design, recycling waste material for the compost for the plants. All the packaging for the food was a biodegradable material, organic based, that broke down into compost. Having finished his ablutions, Foreman returned to the control room, to find an excited Monkley talking into the lit up radio.

'...Space Federation communications centre. I repeat. This is Cadet Nathan Farley, of the International Space Federation at the communications centre. Can you hear me?'

'Happy. Monkley happy.'

'Holy crap.' Foreman stared at the GenMop in amazement. 'Cadet Farley. This is Andrew Foreman. Can you hear me?'

Farley wouldn't hear that for a few minutes, so continued introducing himself. After a long pause Foreman got his reply.

'Yeah. I got some nut-job on before, going on how happy he is.'

Allowing for the pauses, the dialogue continued. 'That's Monkley. The GenMop. You say you're just a cadet?'

'Yeah. I can hear you. We're in the middle of an evacuation. Big shit going down.'

'Evacuation? What the hell is going on down there?'

'Terrorist strike. Bad shit going down all over the damn place.'

'But I...everything was peachy when we left. How come...?'

'I can't stay long, sir. I was just passing the communications centre when I happened to hear the transmission.'

'Farley. Listen carefully. The ship went down. Me and the GenMop are the only survivors. We are in the base and...'

'Glad you made it, sir. Look. I gotta go.' There was the sound of an explosion. 'Shit. Good luck, sir.' There was another explosion and the radio went dead.

'Farley? Farley?'

Foreman stared at the radio. 'Damn. Turn my back for five damn minutes and it all goes to pieces.'

Chapter 6

Foreman sat by the small pool, his feet dangling in the cool water. Monkley offered him a banana, which was declined.

'Right now, is when most self respecting human would get totally hammered. That's one thing the brass thought not to send here. Booze. Not a priority. Boy. They got that bit wrong.'

'Andy not happy.'

'Hmm. You got that right, pal.' He sighed. 'What the hell is going on down there? The communications centre is usually manned twenty four seven by teams of eight. We get a cadet, desperate to get out of the damn place. Shit. I hope the kid made it. You know something? For once in my life, I'm in the right place at the right time. We got all we need to live out our lives right here. No rent to pay, no boss on our backs giving us grief. Heck. We don't even have to worry about the damn weather.' He stood up. 'From now on, pal, this our little world. Come on. Lets go exploring. See what the hell we got to work with.'

Together they explored the section of fruit trees. There were three types of apple, two banana trees, three types of citrus, lime, orange and lemon. Two peach trees, and one pineapple. Some of them had produced self setting offspring on the rich soil. Foreman knew as much about horticulture as he did radios. He was pretty sure some thinning would be needed to ensure all maturing trees had sufficient nutrients. In the well stocked food storage area, there was a huge variety of processed foods, all sealed in the biodegradable packaging. By his estimation, enough to last him and Monkley for years.

Clothing would last him forever, but some thought had to be given to laundry chores. Even he had limits on how bad he would allow himself to smell. Toiletries were well stocked. With the toilet serving as a bidet and drier in one, toilet tissue wasn't an issue.

Medical supplies were adequate, and enough in the right hands to deal with most emergencies. He had a terrible vision of Monkley with a scalpel in one hand and a manual in another, with himself writhing in agony with an appendix about to explode. Motto to live by and note to self. Stay healthy.

The base control centre with the controls for the entire base was at least simple to read. Each gauge was clearly identified and as far as he could tell, everything read normal. What the hell he would do if something suddenly wasn't reading normal, he managed to put out of his head. Bridges to cross when they needed crossing. He would try to figure things out before anything went pear shaped, though.

'Now, this could be fun, pal.'

The six wheeled all terrain explorer could seat six people, suited, because it was uncovered. Battery powered and solar charged, it had a top speed of thirty miles per hour and a range of two hundred miles on a full charge. Six huge independently suspended wheels were made of Luxotral, like ninety percent of the vehicle. It was housed in its own bay next to the main airlock. The controls were basic enough that an average eight year old could drive it with minimal instruction.

The hydroponics section was unused, the nutrient dosed water in continuous circulation to keep it fresh. All it needed were the seeds to be added and cultivated. A storage box next to the unit had a huge variety of seeds, hermetically sealed and well labelled. Starting that off would be high on the list. Stay healthy. No Monkley with scalpels.

Basic gardening tools were stored in a small shed. The prolific growth of the trees and bushes meant a large part of his work would involve maintenance to keep some kind of control over it. Already, the perimeters of the "jungle" were overgrown to the extent where it was impossible to move through without a machete to hack with. Just to try out his skills, he picked up the machete and began hacking away. To do a proper job of it, he would have to hack and thin out, collect everything up and pile it on one of the four composting sites. The one creature brought in from Earth was the humble worm. The lushness of the jungle was in no small part to their vigilance.

Without predatory bird life, the compost heaps positively heaved with activity.

Clearing a path through to one corner, Foreman stopped in mid hacking. Before him was a site so unexpected, he dropped the machete.

'You beauties.'

Thriving well in a small patch, hidden behind several larger trees, was a miniature plantation of Marijuana plants. Most plants were taller than he was.

'Monkley. I just died and woke up in heaven. I'm guessing this isn't authorised by the I S F, pal.' He caressed one of the spiky five pronged leaves. 'I'm thinking some forward planning was brought along a few seeds and when nobody was looking, accidentally dropped a few. Remind me to build a small shrine in his honour, pal.'

'Andy Happy.'

'I'll be more than happy, pal. Now. It's a popular misconception that the plants are grown for the leaves. This is what we need. These buds, see?'

'Buds.'

'Right. These are ready for harvesting. A sort of reddish brown. Don't ask how I know about this, by the way. Let's just say I knew some useful people back in my student days. I'll just grab a few of these. Come on, pal.'

Foreman went to his sleeping quarters. 'All I need to do is leave this in here,' he said, opening a small cupboard, 'Say for a day or two, until it's dried right out. Strictly speaking, and for the purists, it should then be cured, which could take a couple of weeks. That improves things, but it isn't essential. Time for that later. This is about stress release, so tomorrow night, I'll be relieving my stress, big time. I now think I have a reasonable chance of hanging on to my sanity. Hungry?'

'Monkley hungry.'

'Okay, pal. You go and eat and I'll grab a snack.'

Monkley ran off to help himself from the jungle, and Foreman raided the food store. Choosing a package of some synthetic protein base, he nuked it in the microwave and ate it with little enthusiasm. All he could think about was the radio call. Explosions in the I S F complex meant big time trouble. And whatever had been going down had stranded him on Mars for the foreseeable future, if not indefinitely. He was pretty sure he could live with that. Although a reasonably personable individual, he was happier when he was on his own, keeping busy, learning and discovering. People he could take or leave. Animals he preferred for company, and Monkley filled that job description. Hell. He could even hold a rudimentary conversation. The limits of the GenMop's ability to learn and reason had never been satisfactorily pushed as much as they should have, he was beginning to suspect. Damn it, Monkley had managed to turn the radio on, when he'd drawn a blank. Perhaps in this new environment, Monkley could learn heaps more stuff.

He'd finished the meal without even realising he had been eating it. His mind was all over the place. There was one thing that as a human being, he just had to do.

Chapter 7

Foreman cleared a section of the jungle, on the side of the main pool, away from most of the other trees. With the spade, he dug a shallow grave. From a locker, he had found a spare space suit, one of a dozen. He lay the suit in the grave, a helmet representing the head. Then he covered it up with the soil. To mark the grave, he planted a small seedling, an apple, he thought, where the headstone would be. Monkley watched from a distance, as Foreman laboured away. Words were needed.

'Right. Okay. Now, maybe there's a god listening. Maybe even *the* God. If so, you'll know I'm something of an agnostic. Nothing personal, you understand. I mean. You got your work cut out, right? You made one heck of a Universe to take care of. But, I figure I gotta say a few words. Commander Ashley Phillips, Science Officer, Elizabeth Mauler and Captain Donna Sanders were good people, you know? Yeah. Sure you do. They didn't deserve to come all the way out here just to...Well, it's true. Shouldn't have happened. And like that kid what's his name. Farley. Just a kid. A wannabe astronaut. A space cadet. I mean, what's that all about? He didn't deserve to...Maybe he made it. I hope he made it. The world needs kids like Farley. Look. I'm not blaming you. Shit. The ship was man made. The war or whatever the hell is going on is man made.' He wiped tears away. 'Right. For a start, I wanna say thanks for sparing me and Monkley. We don't deserve special treatment. At least I don't. Monkley is such a great creature. At least here he can be more like a proper chimp. I guess that's about all I gotta say. You got my friends off the ship, now. Look after them. Thanks.'

He stood and stared at the grave, his heart heavy, his future in the lap of the God he had just reached out to. Monkley walked over to him and took Foreman's hand, and then jumped up into his arms. Together they stared in silent contemplation. In some small way, ghosts had been laid to rest.

Chapter 8

Foreman had tried to keep active, not thinking about all the things going on. He was also trying to stop thinking about the dope. He was barely holding it together, that much he knew. By nature, he was a strong minded individual, positive in outlook, optimistic and reasonably resourceful. But like many, there was only so much he could take. In a short space of time, he had flown millions of miles in a cramped spaceship, crashed and survived, lost three good colleagues and friends, and discovered that in his absence, his home planet was once again in self destruct mode. He couldn't even begin to speculate about the fate of his friends and family on Earth. That was a bit much for anyone.

He attacked the overgrown marijuana crop with a machete, clearing the plants to grow unencumbered to reach their maximum potential. Monkley got stuck in, carrying the loose stuff away to the compost heap. After a couple of hours, Foreman was satisfied the dope would be just dandy.

'I could kill for a beer, Pal. But I've been thinking. All this fruit. I should be able to make some kinda booze from it. My old dad used to brew all sorts of rot-gut in his den at the back of the house. Wine, vodka, beer. If he wasn't making it, he was drinking it. He sold enough off to pay for everything he drank. Mom always looked down her nose at him, but she could put it away when she was in a mood to. Time for a smoke, pal.'

Before he went to retrieve his dried stash of dope, he decided such a momentous occasion was deserving of being special. He found two tarpaulin from the tool shed. Cutting lengths of rope, he made hammocks between tree trunks, close to the waterfall. He had learned to work the computerised music gizmo, so the whole base became filled with sound. Just background noise.

Satisfied the dope had dried sufficiently, he found a clean storage jar. Poking a hole in the lid, he jammed a short piece of hose into it. Crumbling a handful of dried dope into the jar, he fashioned a spill which he lit and let the flame lick the dope. When it was smouldering, he replaced the lid and took it to the hammocks. Climbing onto it, he lay back. Following his lead, Monkley did the same.

'Okay. Here goes.' he put the end of the hose in his mouth and drew in the smoke, deep into his lungs. 'Damn!' he said with a spluttering coughing fit. 'That is awesome.'

Monkley sniffed the air. He began clapping his hands and slapping his chest.

'Oh, pal. I really don't think...'

Monkley had other ideas. He stood up on the hammock, swaying precariously, clapping his hands and chest slapping.

'Oh, what the hell. I reckon you deserve a blast.'

Monkley put the hose in his mouth and breathed in. Slowly, as Foreman had done, he let the smoke out. 'Happy.' He took another hit.

'Okay. Pass it over.'

Monkley handed the jar back. Foreman smoked for a couple of minutes, and then let Monkley have another blast.

'Haaaaapy.'

Foreman chuckled. 'Okay, pal. Just lay back and chill out.'

Monkley stretched out on his back, hands behind his head, legs crossed. He had a strangely dreamy look about his face. Foreman smoked for a few more minutes, letting the mellow feelings envelop him. As his mind relaxed, he put the jar safely to one side. A lot of the tension was finally leaving him. The pair were soon snoring in a deep and peaceful sleep.

Chapter 9

They had slept for hours. Monkley woke first, jumping onto Foreman's chest.

'What? Oh. You're awake, so you think I should be awake. I guess you're right. Boy. I don't know about you, but I needed that.' Natural sunlight streaked through the translucent roof of the base. 'I have no idea what time it is, but it's day outside. Right now, I'm feeling like a tourist who went on holiday and never left the resort. How about you and I taking a spin in the horseless carriage and have a look around?'

'Fun?' Monkley only understood one word in ten, but Foreman's new upbeat mood sounded promising. 'Play?'

'Sort of play. Yeah. Come on.'

Monkley had to wear his own space suit, because it was the only one small enough. Foreman found a new one, and fitted full oxygen packs to both suits. The controls on the buggy were basic forwards and reverse, a steering wheel, and a brake pedal. That was it. Closing the inner airlock door, Foreman opened the outer door and drove out. He stopped as soon as he was clear of the airlock.

'Monkley. Go close the door, will you?'

Monkley jumped down, hit the button to close the door and jumped back in his seat. Casting a ridiculously long shadow, Olympus Mons stretched out into the Martian sky, the end disappearing into the red dust laden atmosphere. Immediately in front of the base main airlock doors was a ramp, constructed to drive the buggy up the side of the crater to the plateau above without the risk of rolling over in the soft iron rich sand. Foreman took that route, the six wheels sending red dust clouds up behind them. After a steady three hundred yard climb, they rocked over the lip of the crater. Once on the plateau, Foreman stopped. Before them for as far as the horizon, the desolate beauty of the red planet.

Deciding not to stray far in unfamiliar territory, with its landscape of gentle undulations, Foreman followed the rim of the crater. It looked like a sunny day in the Nevada desert, but he knew that the cold would kill them instantly, with just the thermal insulation and temperature control unit of their suits stopping that from happening. And if that didn't get them, the CO₂ would finish them off. As they drove around the crater, Foreman's mood became more sombre with each mile. It took nearly two hours to circumnavigate the crater and return to the ramp. Before driving down the slope, Foreman took in the bleak and lifeless planet.

With a sigh, his true situation struck him hard. He was the only human on the planet. If the unthinkable had happened on Earth, he could literally be the last man ever. With that sombre thought, he drove at a steady speed down the ramp, Monkley jumping out to open the airlock, waiting as Foreman drove inside before closing the outer doors, and opening the inner airlock doors. Once safely inside, Foreman removed his helmet and suit. Monkley did the same.

'It's official, pal. At least for the time being, it's just you and me.'

Monkley looked up at him, his huge soft brown eyes with a wisdom and understanding belying his chimpanzee features. The GenMop was a clone from a tiny family of other GenMops. Now he too was perhaps the last of his kind. It was entirely possible neither of them would ever see another of their own kind until the day they died.

'Hungry,' said Monkley, disappearing into the jungle.

Foreman watched him go, wondering if the little guy could only see the deep sadness of their situation when he looked up at the human. It was obviously easier to think of bananas rather than think of himself as being one life away from extinction. Foreman stripped naked, filled the jar with fresh dope, slipped into the small pool and endeavoured to obliterate the dark despondent thoughts from his mind.

Chapter 10

Foreman stared at the radio. He'd figured out the controls. What he hadn't figured out was how he was going to summon up the courage to turn it on and try to communicate with Earth. If he didn't try, a part of his brain could pretend everything was still okay. That maybe nations had said 'sorry' to each other and kissed and made up. He remembered his old man. After some pressure from Mom, he had retired from the air-force and settled for a desk job in the city. After the adventurous life as a fighter pilot, one day was now a repeat of the previous one and he would die a little more each day. Every Saturday, he would buy a lottery ticket but he never watched the live draw. Instead, he would take off for his den, play solo darts while he drank his grog, and listen to the sports on the radio, while mom would watch the Saturday movie, and eat chocolate.

But, on Sunday morning, he would check the lotto results, screw up the yellow ticket and throw it in the waste paper basket, usually with a muttered oath or two. One Sunday morning, young Andrew Foreman had watched the ritual for the thousandth time, the well practised shot into the basket followed by the swear words, followed by Mom's knowing "I told you" smile.

'Dad. Why don't you ever check the results on Saturday night?'

His dad smiled. 'Because, Son, for a whole night, I can dream I won. Just for a few damn hours, I could be a millionaire. And I could be. It could just as well be me as some other shmuck.'

Sitting in front of the radio, for the first time, Foreman truly understood what his father meant. If he didn't turn on the radio and listen to the irritating static, it could be that everything was okay. He could imagine that at the other end was a cadet like Farley, who would be laughing and saying, 'Thank God that spot of bother is all over. Hey, Mr Foreman. We got a rescue ship on its way to get you home. Just hang in there and you'll be home in no time.'

It could be just like that. Like his dad dreaming for a whole night he could be the next big winner, Foreman thought that if he didn't turn on the radio, then everything on Earth was still peachy. Only flicking that switch would make the horror all real. That was still too much reality to accept, right then. He would hang on to hope, to the illusion, for one more night. He left the room and the auto light turned itself off.

Chapter 11

For something to do, Monkley took care of the laundry. For a moment, he watched the sheets and clothes spin gently in the machine. Wearing clothes had been natural to him, never knowing anything different. But since taking up permanent residence in the base, shedding the unnecessary garments, he had no clothes to wash. He wondered why Andy still wore clothes. It was never cold inside the base. People were the most peculiar animals, sometimes. He liked Andy. Life had always been fun with Andy. Games. Stories. He liked it when Andy told him stories. Happy. Monkley happy.

He left the washing and looked for Andy. He found him at the compost heap, turning it over with a spade.

'Hi, pal. Keeping busy?'

'Story. Happy.'

'What, now?'

Monkley jumped up and down and did a back flip. 'Story, Happy.'

'Okay. Give me a minute.'

He squatted at the large pool side, splashed water over his face and cupped his hands to take a drink. Then he sat and Monkley joined him, wrapping his arm around him.

'Story. Yeah. It's been a while. Right. There once was a funny little guy called Monkley.'

Monkley clapped his hands and whooped. He loved stories about himself the most.

'And Monkley wanted a banana.'

'Banana.'

'A big banana. This big.' He stretched his arms wide.

'Banana big.'

'Very big. So big banana...'

'Banana big.'

'So big, Monkley couldn't carry it.'

'Monkley. Monkley.'

'Right. And a big banana. And Monkley...'

'Monkley.'

'He couldn't carry the banana, it was so big.'

'Big banana.'

'So, Monkley ate the big banana.'

'Oooh! Banana.'

'Yes.'

Monkley stretched his arms wide. 'Banana big.'

'Big banana.'

'Oooh!'

To Monkley, that was a great story. It had two of his favourite things in it. Himself, and a banana. Now, that's a story. He clapped his hands in appreciation. 'Happy.' With bananas on his mind, Monkley ran off into the jungle.

'Some people are easily pleased,' said Foreman.

Before he soaked in the small pool, Foreman checked on his "wine". In a bucket with a mixture of fruit juices, turning into several pints of fermenting something. He had found a box of yeast for baking bread. Not the most ideal, true, but with luck, it would transform the brew into something drinkable. The bubbles rising to the surface were a positive sign something magical was going on. Covering the bucket up, it was time for his nightly smoke and dip in the small pool.

Chapter 12

Foreman stared in the mirror. It wasn't pretty. He had shaving foam all over his ten day beard. He hadn't brushed his hair in a week. His eyes and the rest of his face seemed suddenly much older than his thirty eight years. thirty eight was the new twenty eight, right? Even with the dope he wasn't sleeping too good. Without the razor touching his face, he washed off the foam. It was time to face his demon.

On his way to the communications room, he passed Monkley carrying clean laundry. He took his duties very seriously. It gave him purpose.

'Good morning, Monkley.'

'Morning, Andy.'

'I'm going to try the radio again.'

Monkley seemed to consider the implications of that. He nodded, and then hurried off to Foreman's room. Foreman had barely got seated in front of the radio, when Monkley joined him, jumping up onto the bench.

'I just want you to know, if we can't contact anyone, it isn't the end of the world. Damn. I wish I hadn't said that. No. Foreman. Focus. What I mean is, Monkley, we have to stay positive. I'll keep trying every day until we get somebody. In the meantime, we need to make sure the base is functioning as it should be. For one thing, I noticed the waterfall has slowed down. It could mean clogged filters or something. That's my priority for today. Apart from the radio, that is. Right. Here goes.' He flicked the switch. 'This is Andrew Foreman. This is Andrew Foreman. Is anybody getting this?' He looked at Monkley. 'Now. We don't need to get too concerned if we don't hear back right away. I remember in one of our training sessions, radio contact can prove iffy. What I just sent them can take anywhere between four and twenty one minutes to get there. Then, assuming we have a contact at the other end, it will take at least the same time to hear back.'

'Oooh!'

'Exactly. Now, when we got hold of Farley, it was only a few minutes delay. Assuming things haven't changed that much since then, we still have to wait a little while for the reply. In the meantime, I'll just keep going.'

'Oooh!'

'Andrew Foreman calling Earth. Andrew Foreman calling Earth. Anyone awake down there? Just to let you guys know, the base seems to be performing well. I am here with Monkley the GenMoP, and between us we will do all we can to survive and look after the place. Everything seems to be working well, but I think the waterfall filtration system is becoming clogged. I have no idea where the filters are or how to fix them, so this could be fun. If anyone has any advice, I'd be pleased to hear it.' He repeated the message another three times. Then he stopped and waited.

'Monkley. I'll stay here while you go get me a coffee. Off you go, pal.'

Monkley jumped down and ran out the room, Foreman folded his arms and stared at the radio, willing somebody, anybody, to reply. He was still waiting when Monkley returned with a coffee for him and juice for himself. An hour later, they still hadn't heard back.

'I guess that's it for now. Just remember. No reply doesn't mean the end of...It doesn't mean anything. Come on.'

The waterfall was running at about half the flow-rate it had been when he had first seen it, just two weeks before. At that rate of decline, it would be stopped completely in another two weeks. Although aesthetically designed, it was one of the most functional parts of the base. The continuous circulation of the treated water ensured stagnation didn't set in. If he couldn't fix it, he doubted if they would survive a month.

Cupping his hand, he tasted it, directly from the waterfall. It tasted good. 'Monkley. In the maintenance room, there's a P H meter. We used it the other day. Remember it?'

Monkley scurried off and returned with the meter.

'Good, Monkley.' Foreman turned it on and placed the tip of the probe in the running water. 'Six point seven. Now, I might be just a veterinarian, but I do have some scientific knowledge. Pure water is about seven. The lower the reading, the more acidic it is. Drinking water is okay between, say, six point five and about eight point five. So what we have here, is well within safe limits.'

'Ooooh!'

'Right. What does concern me, is the water flow rate. It has slowed down considerably in the last couple of weeks. This means the system is getting blocked up. Probably a filter somewhere. I have to find the filter, and either replace it, or clean it out.'

Along the wall of the base, starting from the back of the mound of the waterfall, was a pipe made of Luxotral, about the diameter of Foreman's arm. This took a sharp right angled turn behind the jungle. There was a narrow path between the jungle and the wall and Foreman followed the pipe with Monkley behind him. As expected, it continued past the marijuana crop, and took another right turn. Another few yards brought them to the water treatment unit. It was housed in a dedicated three sided structure, with the wall of the base being the fourth wall. The structure was around thirty feet high. There was a warning on the door.

'Caution. Rubberised suits must be worn during maintenance. Incoming water highly acidic.'

'Oooh!'

'We've been warned, pal.' Foreman opened the door and a light came on. On the back wall, a schematic drawing of the plant simplified things. Foreman studied it, glancing at the plan and the plant. 'Right. Inlet water comes through the wall of the base, here. It is then neutralised by adding sodium carbonate. Now, the incoming water is just to top up the reservoir. Every drop is recycled. Most of the water vapour in the air waters the trees and plants. You and I consume around fifty pints a day. At a guess, the treatment plant is topping up at around two hundred pints each day.'

'Oooh!'

'See that tank there?'

'Tank.'

'That contains the sodium carbonate. Enough to run the plant when fully occupied for around three years. It has inbuilt P H monitors that control how much sodium carbonate is added to the incoming water. When the water is about seven P H, it is released into the filters to remove the organic and iron stuff. Then it goes through a final filtration unit, where chlorine is added to purify it. Finally, it goes to the main reservoir which is continuously circulating to keep it fresh, topped by treated water from this plant. I hope you are paying attention, Monkley. There'll be a test afterwards. Okay. I think we have two issues to deal with. First of all, the level of sodium carbonate needs tweaking up a bit. That will bring the end product back up to nearer the seven P H it should be.'

He studied the schematics for a moment. 'Water from the reservoir is continuously going through the system. That way, the treatment plant isn't trying to treat just the Martian water. The incoming is being diluted with the fresh stuff, giving the system a fighting chance. Now this pipe here, see, is divided into two. There are two pumps, running off solar energy panels on the roof. There are two pumps to provide backup and also so that the system can keep working, whilst repairs and maintenance are carried out. Each pump works in ten hour cycles.' He touched one pump. 'This one is working, the other one is ready to take over. Each pump has an outlet with a final filter. My guess is that one or both of these filters need either cleaning out, or replacing.'

Returning to the schematic, he studied the instructions. 'Ah!. It says here, they need to be replaced. They cannot be cleaned out.'

In one corner were two storage containers. One marked in green with the words new filter cartridges, and the other in red stating used cartridges only. Opening the container of new ones, he took out two. Taking the 'c' spanner off the wall, he took that and the new filters to the filter housings.

'I'm pretty certain water at this point is just that. Water. The rubber suits are for working on the rest of the plant. However. Just to be on the safe side...'

Hanging up on the wall were two rubber suits. He put one on.

'Does my bum look big in this?'

'Bum big, bum big.'

'Trust you to say that. Okay, pal. You step outside while I do this little job.'

Monkley stepped just outside, watching Foreman at work. Between the pumps and the filter housing were valves. On the pump that wasn't running, he turned the valve clockwise. Then using the 'c' spanner, loosened the retaining nuts either side of the filter housing. Removing the housing, he slipped the filter out. It was impossible to tell if this was the problem or not as the internals of the filter were inside its own sealed unit. The direction of flow was clearly marked with a black arrow. Foreman inserted the new filter and refitted the filter housing using the 'c' spanner. One done, one to go. On the wall was a switch to turn on and off the pumps by overriding the automatic system. He turned on the one he'd been working on and turned the backup unit off. He repeated the procedure on the second pump, turned it all over to automatic, checked for leaks, and took off the rubber suit. Finally, he adjusted the sodium carbonate input by the minimum indicated increase level. Job done.

'Come on, Monkley. Let's go take a look at the waterfall.' When they got there, he nodded, satisfied that the filter changing had served its purpose and the waterfall was running at full capacity. 'Time for a feed.'

Chapter 13

'I found these in the food store. They'll make a change from all that fruit you eat.'

Foreman poured some of the nuts onto a plate and placed it in front of Monkley. Monkley ate those as he watched Foreman with a protein meal. According to the label, it was meant to be chicken flavour. It wasn't like any chicken he'd ever tasted.

'All this stuff was shipped in from Earth. I suppose one day, the base will be completely self sufficient.' He was never sure how much of anything he said had any meaning to the GenMoP. Monkley as just a chimpanzee wasn't that far behind humans. Sharing ninety nine percent of their DNA with humans, put them right up there. Monkley had been trained from birth by Foreman, and with the artificial voice box giving him a wider vocal range than other chimps, he was able to express his thoughts and feelings to Foreman. 'I was thinking...'

'Ooooh!.'

'Don't act so surprised. I'd like to take a look at the crash site. Maybe place a marker. Not sure what. I'll think of something.'

With the meal finished, Foreman gave some thought to the problem. The idea of a cross came to him, but he wasn't particularly religious, and wasn't sure what beliefs his colleagues had had. History on Earth would place their names somewhere for posterity, he was sure of that. Assuming there was anyone left to do that. No. It was something he felt was important to do. The shallow grave he had dug was one thing, but somehow seemed inadequate. It had to be something durable for the Martian environment.

In the maintenance workshop, he looked around for inspiration. Stacked up in one corner were several offcuts of Luxotral pipe. Nothing was ever discarded in the base. Selecting a piece three feet long, he clamped it in the vice. With a marker, he wrote the names of the three dead astronauts on the pipe. Then, he got a drill and drilled small holes into the pipe where the letters were. All the time, Monkley was watching him, perched on a stool.

'This should last a few decades, pal. Now go and suit up.'

Foreman checked the air supply was full and that Monkley's helmet was secure. Monkley opened and closed the airlock doors and Foreman drove out.

'I'm pretty sure it's that way.'

It was impossible to use a compass on Mars, because the red planet has no magnetic field. The magnetic field on Earth is created by the inner core revolving inside the planet. The core on Mars did not revolve. This was one of the reasons the base was where it was, not far from Olympus Mons. The ship had orbited the planet twice and was on a gradual decent towards the mountain and the base.

Foreman drove the buggy up the ramp and headed left. It was early in the Martian day, so they would have plenty of time. If they couldn't locate the fallen ship, they would return before the air supply reached halfway. As they drove through the lifeless terrain, Foreman wondered at the attraction of the red planet. Who the hell would want to live here, anyway? Only idiots like him with no choice. But the bigger picture was to use Mars as a stepping stone for the rest of the solar system, and then beyond. Once the speed of light problem had been resolved, there would be no stopping mankind.

Finding the wreck was easier than Foreman could have hoped for. The blackened lump stuck out on the flat plateau like a zit on a nose. Foreman stopped the buggy a few yards from the remains. He sat and stared at it for a moment.

'Why? What the hell made it crash?'

'Crash.'

'Millions of miles of fault free flying, then the minute we get here, boom.'

'Boom.'

Phillips had given the order to buckle up for landing and Foreman had finished securing

Monkley in his cage. He had been about to return to the cockpit and strap himself in, when they had dropped like a stone. From the tiny room where the cage was, Foreman had heard a muffled bang, a small explosion. He had been about to open the door to join the others, when the ship started spinning and falling. The sudden acceleration and the spinning had caused him and probably the others to black out. He doubted if being buckled up would have made much difference. The few seconds prior to the ship exploding would not have been enough for him to free the others and get far enough from the ship. But they were beyond saving. If the door hadn't opened enough to squeeze through, he and Monkley would have perished, also.

Foreman got down and Monkley followed him, cautiously, to the ship. The whole thing looked like some blackened work of surrealist art. Macabre, and permeated with death. The airlock door was still wide open, distorted from the intense heat. Climbing inside, Foreman's heart sank at the sight. The charred remains were barely recognisable as human beings. He could hardly distinguish who was who. He had no intention of removing the bodies and burying them outside. The ship would be their coffin.

'Mind you don't cut your suit on the jagged stuff, pal.'

Foreman could see there was nothing worth salvaging from the ship. He'd have been surprised if there had been.

'I guess you three died doing what you loved most.'

He was about to leave, when something caught his eye. Something that didn't look right. From all the other damage, he saw something odd. Kneeling down for a closer look, low down on the instruments and controls, a small hole, roughly fist sized. The edges of the hole were forced outwards. Any holes made by things smashing into it would have gone inwards, not outwards. The conclusions he was coming to, confused him. But he could see no alternative explanations. Something had exploded inside the instrumentation, causing the destruction of the ship.

'Foreman. Get real. You got this all wrong.'

He knew the explosion hadn't happened before he had gone into the storage area where Monkley was caged. Somebody would probably have mentioned it. This was it. This had caused the ship to crash and kill the others.

'It must have just been a piece of faulty instrumentation, right pal?'

Not prepared to accept the alternative, he peered into the hole. From what little he could see, the internal damage emanated from a single point. Everything from that point had been forced outwards. An electronics engineer would have been able to get to the bottom of it, but he had limited knowledge on such things. His gut feelings were telling him this wasn't a piece of faulty equipment. The systems had been checked out hundreds of times prior to take off. A horrible and terrifying word came to his mind. Sabotage. This was no accident. Three people had been murdered.

Feeling the anger about to consume, he had to get out. His mind was racing, confused and angry. Somebody was responsible. He leaned on the buggy, staring at the ship. He felt nauseated, but one of the first things he was taught was never vomit in a space suit.

'Bastards.'

'Bastards.'

'Somebody wanted us dead, pal.'

'Oooh!'

Taking the length of pipe, he secured it to the wreck. Then he saluted. Monkley copied him. They got back in the buggy and with the mountain as a guide, they returned to the base.

Chapter 14

'I need to talk to somebody, dammit. Foreman to Earth. Foreman to Earth. Don't make me come down there and kick ass. Listen. I don't give a shit if it's just the cleaner. Just bloody talk to me.' Two hours of talking to the box and listening to static was not improving his mood. He turned the set off. 'Nothing personal, pal, but right now, I never felt so alone. I need a drink.'

The fruit wine had cleared to a light pink colour. Using a cup, he scooped some out. He sniffed it.

'Smells okay.'

The first sip of the deep citrus flavour made him wince. By the third, his taste buds were accustomed to it.

'You know? For a first attempt, not too bad.'

'Me some, me some,' said Monkley, slapping his chest.

'Okay. Just a drop. Go get a cup.'

Monkley got a cup and handed it to Foreman who scooped up a half measure.

'Just sip it.'

Monkley sniffed the brew and took a little sip. He pulled a face at the sharp taste, but it didn't stop him finishing the cup. Foreman filled both cups and they went to the small pool and climbed into the hammocks.

'I can't get my head around it, pal. I hope I'm wrong. Shit. I hope I'm wrong. I can only use my eyes and brain and let my imagination fill in the blanks. That tiny explosion brought the ship down. It had to. It didn't happen during the crash. It caused the damn crash. But assume I'm right about this. Why? And more important, who?'

Monkley belched.

'I would sure like answers, pal. But if it was deliberate, and my instincts are screaming it was, who could gain from it?'

Monkley belched again.

'Somebody wanted us dead. But why? It isn't like we were about to do anything out of the ordinary. The whole point of the mission was one of plant maintenance and to see how you reacted to the new environment. Nothing to gain from stopping us doing that. It doesn't make any sense. And all that stuff on Earth. The I S F base was being attacked. We heard that going on. We haven't been able to reach them since that happened. If it had been an isolated thing, say, just the I S F, somebody would have taken it over. Unless we are being deliberately ignored, somebody would have tried communicating with us. That's a worry, pal. It makes me think whatever happened down there was bigger than that. Much bigger.'

The only reply he got was Monkley snoring. Getting out of the hammock as quietly as he could, Foreman returned to the container of fruit wine and drank several cups of it, as the dark depressing thoughts swirled around in his mind. Somebody had wanted them dead.

Chapter 15

Hard work helped Foreman keep it together. He put in twelve hour days, clearing the jungle, taking cuttings, turning over compost heaps, cleaning. When he wasn't doing that, he exercised, jogging back and forth along the central path between the jungle and the quarters. A small gymnasium had some basic equipment, and he had at least one workout each day.

Monkley contributed by taking care of the laundry, basic food preparation, working alongside Foreman and generally being there to support. Several hours each day, he would take to the trees, swinging from branch to branch, eating and sleeping. In the evening, they would sample the wine and have a smoke. Feeling slightly stoned, he jumped down off his hammock and joined Foreman on his.

'Story. Happy story.'

'Not sure I'm in the mood, pal.'

'Story.'

Foreman stroked Monkley's head. 'Remember when you were a baby? You could be a bit of a handful. You got out your cage one night. Boy. Did you make a mess. My old boss was not amused. She said, "That GenMoP is more trouble than he's worth". She never called you Monkley. You were on thin ice, I can tell you. But I knew it was because you had a lively mind. You got bored easily. So, that night, we made a deal. If I told you a story, you would be a good boy. So I did. Every night, I'd make up some stupid story and then you'd yawn and sleep like a baby.'

'Story. Happy.'

'Okay. There was a cute little chap named Monkley.'

'Monkley.'

'And one day, he went up in the sky all the way to Mars.'

'Mars.'

'We'll skip the landing part. Anyway, we found this jungle, with lots of trees and cool things like bananas.'

'Oooh.'

'And Monkley became the king of the jungle. And he would play and climb trees and eat and sleep.'

'Hmm. Monkley.'

'And he had a best friend called Andy.'

'Monkley.'

'But he wasn't king of the jungle. Monkley was king of the jungle.'

'King.'

'King Monkley, yeah.'

Foreman spoke softly and in no time, Monkley was fast asleep, and they lay together, Foreman trying not to dwell on the events, trying not to feel angry. Out there in the Martian sand, three people, bright, young and supremely talented were nothing more than charred remains. If it had been an accident, mankind pushing everything to the limit, he could have accepted that. He also knew it was entirely possible, he and Monkley could die millions of miles from home, never knowing why somebody wanted them dead. He felt helpless and vulnerable and there was nothing he could do about it.

Chapter 16

'I just can't get it out of my head, pal,' said Foreman, putting clean sheets on the bed, because frankly, Monkley was rubbish at it. 'I keep trying to come up with some logical explanation. If it was deliberate, what's the motive? How could anyone possibly gain from it? Pass me that blanket. Thanks. Could it be political? I don't see it. Mars belongs to nobody and everybody. Just about every nation on Earth contributed, and those who couldn't afford to, gave it moral support. The project was so huge, it stopped war in its tracks. For the first time in human history, the whole world was working together.'

He sat on the bed, and Monkley jumped up beside him. Monkley stroked Foreman's beard. In all the years together on Earth, Foreman had been clean shaven. The hairy face intrigued the GenMoP. He stroked Foreman's beard and then his own hairy face.

'Don't worry. I'm not turning chimp. You're the king of the jungle.'

'Monkley. King.'

'But you just remember, pal. You might be king of the jungle, I'm still emperor of Mars. Hey. I kinda like that. Andrew Foreman, Emperor of Mars. And my teachers at school said I'd never amount to anything. Hmm. Not much of an empire. A dirty red rock floating around in space. Maybe we should open up a bed and breakfast place. I can just see the blurb. "Tired of the same old resorts? Reinvigorate yourself on the Red Planet. Miles of uninterrupted beaches. Bungy jumping off Olympus Mons. Plenty of parking. Five star cuisine by our experienced chef, Monsieur Monkley. Speciality dish, raw banana."

'Banana.'

'Of course, we'd soon have to franchise. Venus, Neptune. Today the solar system, tomorrow the galaxy.'

'Oooh!'

'That's your answer to everything. Oooh!'

'Oooh!'

'Come on. I've got a special little job for you, pal.'

In the maintenance room, one area was dedicated to the storage of seeds and potting. From a storage locker, Foreman took out a plastic container from which he removed a small soft tipped paintbrush.

'Brush.'

'Brush.'

'Good. Now. I recently discovered, we've been damned lucky to have the fruit that we have had. I just sort of took things for granted. No bees in the base. It turns out, we need to give nature a helping hand.'

'Hand.'

'Exactly. To be more specific, your hands. This is a job eminently suited to you, my little tree climbing friend.'

'Oooh!'

'I thought you'd be impressed. Now come with me.'

Foreman led the way to the jungle. On one of the apple trees, many of the branches were in blossom. 'Flower. Pretty.'

'Pretty.'

'Now watch very closely. Take the brush...'

'Brush.'

'And with the tip, carefully touch this bit. That's the female part.'

'Oooh!'

'Now rub it over this part of the next flower, the male part.'

'Pretty.'

'Then go onto the next one, and the next one. Here. You try.'

Monkley handled the brush with the dexterity of a skilled artist, delicately brushing each blossom in turn.

'Okay. See all those flowers?'

'Pretty.'

'Do this to all the pretty flowers. Off you go.'

Deciding the mission was sufficiently important for the king of the jungle, Monkley set about his task with single minded determination. Foreman knew he wouldn't stop until every blossom had been pollinated. With Monkley fully occupied for several hours, Foreman braced himself for more disappointment at the controls of the radio.

'Foreman to Earth. Foreman to Earth. I just wanna know. Is it something I said? If it is, I'm sorry. But I formally invite you to my birthday party in a couple of weeks. No. Don't bother sending cards. Just come and have a good time. We have all the processed pap you can eat and we do a wicked fruit sundae, minus the ice-cream. We have have a very interesting wine and not a bad organic mind bender. Oh. And if there are any single ladies out there looking for a good time, I have all of my own teeth and I might even shave for the occasion. This is definitely R.S.V.P.'

He sat back and waited. Twenty excruciating minutes rolled by and he was about to turn off the set when he got a reply.

'Foreman. This is Captain Mike Mitchum of I S F S Moonstruck. Boy, you're hard to get hold of. We accept your invite to the party and should be there in about ten days. Shall we bake a cake?'

Foreman wondered if it was a delayed reaction to a combination of his wine and dope. The radio had spoken.

'Captain Mitchum. Are you for real?'

This time, only a minute went by. 'Last time I looked in a mirror. The radio signal to Mars has been interfered with by solar storms. It's the same from Earth. No idea what the hell is going on down there.'

'Yeah. I've been worried sick. I was beginning to think Monkley and I were the only ones left.'

'Monkley's the GenMoP, right?'

'Yeah. Don't tell the little guy, but I'll be damned glad to see a human face.'

'You might change your mind when you see mine.'

'Have you come all this way just to rescue me?'

Mitchum laughed. 'Yeah, like you're that important. We were already on our way for some work we have to do. I'll explain when we get there. Hello? Hel...Forem...damn sol...inds...dio breaking up. We'll keep ...ing to con...see ...soon, Foreman.'

'Hello?'

Finally. Something good happening. Foreman practically danced out of the room. 'Hey, Monkley. Come down here.'

Monkley dropped down from the trees, with a "What? I'm kinda busy, you know?" Look on his face.

'We got people coming. Visitors. People coming here.'

'Oooh!'

'This is going to be one hell of a party, pal.'

'Party.'

'Oh. Yeah. Damn. I can hardly believe it. I can hardly wait. A bit odd though. Why send another ship here so soon after us? That's what Mitchum said. They were already on their way. With the cost of these flights, you'd think we would have all come together. But, hey. I'm not knocking it. It may well be a cock up in planning, but it means we get to go home.'

'Home.'

Chapter 17

Foreman had a new lease on life. He was as excited as a schoolboy going on his first date. He set about a cleaning regime that kept them both busy for twelve hours a day. Poor Monkley was set one task after another. As he was cleaning the buggy, Foreman was doing the really important stuff, like making large quantities of wine and curing the dope. If anybody actually remembered his birthday party he would consider it a flop. With the essentials taken care of, he got busy with the mundane chores, cleaning everything in sight. With a marker, he crossed off each day. Any free time, he was trying to contact Mitchum on the Moonstruck, with only partial success.

'Damn solar winds.'

Finally, the day arrived for the Moonstruck to land.

'Should we wait for them outside?' said Foreman pacing up and down. "You know, be there to greet them? Is that the right thing to do, Monkley?"

'Monkley.'

'I think we should. Do you think we should? Yeah. It's only polite. I think we should. Foreman. Calm down.'

'Andy happy.'

'You bet I'm happy. You'll be happy when you see all those people. I say all those people, I have no idea how many. I hope there's a single lady with them. You have no idea how long... None of your damn business. Just my luck to be a bunch of hairy assed guys, stinking of sweat and spitting tobacco. No. They won't be red-necks. They're astronauts. Intelligent people. Calm down Foreman. Monkley suit up. We'll wait for them outside.'

Relieved for Foreman making a decision, Monkley found his suit and wriggled into it. Five minutes later, they were sitting in the buggy, watching the red tinted sky. Foreman realised they could be sitting there for hours, with no agreed E T A, but he didn't care. Another ship was coming and that's all that mattered. Almost two hours had gone by when they saw it. The Moonstruck had eased into the Martian atmosphere and was on its circumnavigation of the planet, getting closer with each pass to the base. On its third circuit, it was coming in to land.

'Wow. Look at the size of the thing.'

'Oooh!'

The Moonstruck was massive, almost the size of the base. It was too large to land inside the crater, so it landed on the plateau close to the ramp. Foreman put the lever into forward and drove up the ramp to meet the visitors. Up close, the black and grey ship was even more impressive. Foreman parked by the main hatch. Three minutes later, the airlock hatch door opened and steps extended to the ground. Foreman could hardly breathe when two suited humans appeared at the open hatchway. Those two started down the steps, followed by three more.

One man bent down and shook Monkley's hand. 'You must be Foreman.'

'First time I've been mistaken with a GenMoP,' said Foreman.

'Just messing with ya. Mike Mitchum. Good to meet you at last, Foreman.'

'Andy. Call me Andy. Hi, everyone. I can take five of you if Monkley walks back.'

'He's cute,' said a woman. 'He can sit on my lap.'

They all squeezed onto the buggy and Foreman drove back down the ramp. Monkley operated the airlocks and they were all finally inside the base, removing their helmets.

'Okay. Formal intros'. Mike 'head honcho' Mitchum, in charge of this bunch of misfits. My number two, Debbie Warner, geologist. Operations manager, Joe 'If it ain't broke I'll fix it anyway' Hancock. Pete 'if it has an engine I can drive it' Giovanni, and Susan 'I'm not just a pretty face' Redcliff.'

Foreman's mouth went dry when he saw Susan Redcliff without her helmet. Words like stunning, gorgeous and hot went through his mind. "Calm down, Foreman. And oh yeah,

breathe.”

'Welcome. I'm Andy Foreman, veterinarian and personal groom to this chap, Monkley.'

'Cute,' said Redcliff, and Foreman realised she was looking at him, not the GenMoP.

'Err, right. Come on in and I'll show you around.'

'Mind if we take our suits off?' Joe Hancock asked.

'Feel free.' they all stripped down to the regulation I S F undergarments. Whomever designed them, never imagined a woman like Susan Redcliff filling one out. 'Come and grab some wine and we'll have the guided tour.'

'Actually,' said Mitchum, 'This is our third visit.'

'No shit? Sorry. I meant, really?' He led the way to the food and wine.

'We are the drillers,' said Joe Hancock. 'We're the ones who found the water.'

'Is that so? And an excellent drop of water it is too.'

'The filters probably want changing by now,' said Debbie Warner. Debbie was an attractive woman, but plain next to Susan.

'All done,' said Foreman. 'I'd appreciate it if you gave the sodium carbonate settings a once over while you are here. It can wait. What do you think of the wine?'

'Is that what it's supposed to be,' said Giovanni. 'I was about to commandeer it for fuel.'

'Italian,' explained Susan. 'Thinks he knows a bit about wine.'

'Actually,' said Foreman, 'I found some exotic plants in the jungle.'

'Heck,' said Susan. 'The dope seeds took off?'

'You planted dope seeds?' Mitchum said.

'For which I am truly grateful,' said Foreman with a little bow.

'Call it my contribution. I'll have to sample it later.'

'Why wait? I usually have a smoke about this time of night. Wallowing in the pool, relaxing.'

'What are we waiting for then?' said Susan.

'I err, don't have any bathing suits,' confessed Foreman.

'Skinny dipping it is, then. Last one in is a sissy.'

'Looks like my birthday's arrived a couple of days early. You know where the pool is, I'll be there in a minute.'

Chapter 18

Foreman collected up the jars of dope he'd prepared earlier and carried them to the pool. Already full of smoke, he handed them out. None declined.

'The GenMoP uses the pool?' Mitchum asked, as Monkley jumped in.

'The water's filtered constantly,' said Foreman. 'You don't mind do you?'

Mitchum shrugged. 'It's just that I thought Chimps didn't like water much.'

'I threatened him with sleeping in the airlock if he didn't take a regular bath. That's right, isn't it, Monkley?'

'Monkley,' he said, helping himself to a jar and having a smoke.

'I bet the I S F would love to see one of their billion dollar babies getting stoned,' said Debbie.

Foreman was having trouble keeping eye contact with the ladies. "Keep calm, Foreman." 'He knows when to stop. He usually has a smoke then curls up asleep. So. What does bring you here if it wasn't rescuing us?'

'Drilling,' said Mitchum. 'It turns out when we sent down the first bore, we got close, but no cigar. We struck water, like the geologists said we would, but we were off a little way. We hit a kind of shelf. We got water of sorts out of it, but the mineral content is higher than we'd like, and the pressure is lower than we hoped for.'

'Everything seems okay to me,' said Foreman, smoking and averting his eyes from Susan's ample breasts, bobbing up and down so delightfully on the surface of the pool.

'It's okay,' said Debbie, 'But the filters are getting clogged too fast. Without somebody to change them regularly, the reservoir would be a slimy mess in no time. A deeper bore in the right place will give us more pressure and cleaner water to start with.'

'Makes sense. How long will that take?'

Mitchum said, 'A couple of weeks we think. It depends what we hit. The formations are all over the place. Some of it is like pure iron. This is pretty good dope, Andy.'

'My old college pals taught me a thing or two about curing it. Beats me how we all managed to pass the exams.'

'And now you look after this handsome fellow,' said Debbie.

'Oooh!' said Monkley, his eyes beginning to roll around in his head. 'Happy.'

'Okay, Monkley,' said Foreman, taking the jar off him. 'Time for bed, pal.'

Monkley stretched and yawned, kissed Debbie on her cheek and climbed out of the pool and disappeared into the jungle.

'Will he be alright?' Joe asked.

'He'll curl up in a tree somewhere.'

'I don't know about you lot,' said Susan, 'But I'm off to bed.'

'Yeah,' said Mitchum. 'We've an early start in the morning.'

Seven naked people got out of the pool. Foreman tried hard not to show his appreciation of the female form and gathered up the jars. He took those to the kitchen and put them safe for the dope to burn itself out. When he reached his bedroom, he found somebody had beaten him to it.

'Susan. Sorry. I usually sleep here, but it's no bother. I'll bunk down somewhere else.'

'I'll be disappointed if you do, Andy.'

'Oooh!'

Chapter 19

Fingers lightly stroked Foreman's face and he smiled.

'That's nice,' he said and opened his eyes. 'Monkley!'

He was disappointed to find he was the only human in the room, in fact, when he checked, the only human in the base. Monkley handed him a cup of coffee.

'Thanks, pal.'

'Andy happy.'

'Are you kidding? Me, spending the night with the hottest woman this side of the galaxy? Oh. Yeah.'

Stuck on the bathroom door he found a note. "Not keen on beards. See you tonight, Susan."

'Can't argue with that, Monkley. Time for a shave.'

It took longer than usual, but the beard was gone. 'She's right. Much better. Then women usually are right about most things.'

After breakfast, they tidied up. 'I was thinking. It could be interesting, taking a look at the drilling operation. I don't think they'll mind.'

Foreman wasn't surprised to find the buggy gone. It was only a half hour walk up the ramp to the ship. The ship was deserted, the back of it opened up from where the driller and associated equipment was stored. The driller was gone and huge tracks in the soft sand pointed the way. The buggy was parked by the ship, the drilling team using the driller for transportation. Foreman got in the buggy as did Monkley. They followed the tracks for a half hour and came to the site. Like the Moonstruck, the driller was an impressive piece of equipment. Behind it was a trailer stacked with drill tubes, with its own winch crane for manoeuvring the pipes into place. Foreman and Monkley ventured closer. The driller was already grinding its way through the Martian ground. Mitchum saw them and held out his hand to stop them, then he walked over to them.

'Morning,' said Foreman.

'Andy. Morning, Monkley. Look, Andy. Don't take this personally, but this is a work site. Our insurance only covers authorised drillers. If there was an accident...'

'Sorry, Mike. I should have figured it out myself.'

'Hey. No worries. If you move away a little, say to that dune over there, I'll let you watch. This time only though, okay?'

'Fair enough. Thanks, Mike. Come on, Monkley.'

Feeling a little stupid and embarrassed, Foreman led Monkley to the designated dune and sat on top of it. They had quite a good view of the action. He couldn't tell who was who in their suits, as he watched the efficient way the team worked together. The massive driller was fed tubes via the crane, which were manually connected to the preceding tubes. The driller turned the tubes and the industrial diamond drill bit chewed inexorably through the rock, so slowly, it seemed no progress was being made at all. It took nearly two hours before the next tube section was attached.

'Well. I think we get the general idea, pal. Come on.'

They returned to the buggy and left it where they had found it by the ship. Then they walked back to the base.

Chapter 20

Foreman and Monkley prepared the best meal possible from the various vacuum packed supplies, adding sweetener to the wine to improve the harsh citrus taste. It was another nine hours before the airlock door opened and the buggy was driven inside.

'Hey. The workers return.'

Shaking the sand off their suits, they all stripped down to their undergarments.

'How's it going out there?'

'Slow and tedious,' said Mitchum. 'We're used to it.'

Foreman nodded. 'Why don't you all hit the showers and come and eat. Not a bad meal waiting, though I say it myself.'

'Good idea,' said Susan. 'I nearly didn't recognise you.'

'Do you approve?'

'Much nicer,' she said with a pout and a mischievous smile.

When she returned from the bathroom, she looked and smelt good enough to eat. Her thick mane of auburn hair shone and framed her beautiful face. Why a woman like her was remotely interested in him, Foreman could only wonder and be thankful.

'Andy,' said Mitchum as he sipped the wine as he ate. 'I hope I didn't offend you earlier.'

'Hell, no. I could kick myself for being so stupid, coming over there.'

Mitchum shrugged. 'You were just being curious and I understand that. Believe me, if it wasn't for insurance, I'd rope you in and get you working with us.'

'It's cool.'

'I would hardly call it entertainment,' said Giavani. 'Drill a bit further, stick another tube on, drill a bit further... boring, boring.'

'I guess that's why they call them bores,' said Foreman, hardly raising a smile. 'Say. Mike. Could I have a word with you?'

Mitchum stifled a yawn. 'Sorry It's been along day. Yeah. I could do with stretching my legs and breathing air not from a pack on my back.'

'Thanks. Help yourself to wine and I've filled the jars up for a smoke if you want one.'

He followed Mitchum outside and they strolled along the path.

'I didn't want to say anything in front of the others, but there's something I'd very much like your opinion on.'

'Shoot.'

'I have to show you.'

'Okay.'

'It's outside. It's the ship I came down on.'

'That was damn bad luck, Andy. From what you told me, you and the GenMoP were lucky to survive.'

'Mike. We should have all survived. But I need you to see it.'

'Okay. But not right now. We're all bushed. Besides, driving a buggy at night, even with lights on, is asking for trouble. I tell you what. In the morning, I'll get the crew working, then I'll come back in the buggy and we'll take a look. How does that sound?'

'That's a good idea, Mike. We'll be fresh. Listen. Don't say anything to the others, okay? Not until we've had a look. I don't want them worried unduly.'

Mitchum nodded. 'Okay. Andy. Is there something I should be worried about?'

'If your opinion is the same as mine, could be.'

They found the others naked and wallowing in the pool, each with a jar to smoke from. Monkley was snuggled up close to Debbie, as he seemed to have a crush on her. He had the silly mellow look on his face, which reminded Foreman of Stan Laurel from Laurel and Hardy. Slightly self conscious, Foreman stripped off and slipped into the pool and picked up a jar.

Looking into Susan's face, told him the dope in the jar wasn't the only thing smouldering.

Chapter 21

True to his word, Mitchum took his crew to the drill site and returned with the buggy for Foreman. For once, Foreman left Monkley back at the base, putting him in charge of the laundry. The little guy seemed a little put out, but knuckled down to the task. With Mitchum driving, Foreman navigated to the crash site.

'That's one hell of a mess, Andy.'

'They were dead from the impact, before the fire.'

'That's something to be thankful for I guess.'

'Come inside. See what you make of this.'

They opened the airlock door and climbed inside the wreck.

'Shit! You didn't bury them?'

'I thought about it, but the way the sand moves about, they would have soon been uncovered. I figured this way, if anyone wanted to locate the bodies, maybe take them back to Earth, they could be easy to find like this.'

'I suppose. Sorry. I wasn't having a go. It was just a bit of a shock seeing them like this.'

'Yes. It still is for me. Take a look at this.'

Mitchum knelt down to see what Andy was pointing at.

'That isn't good. It looks like some small explosive device was planted. Andy. This is murder.'

Foreman nodded solemnly. 'That's what I thought. I just wanted a second opinion.'

'I don't see what else it could be.'

'There was a bang. Not loud. I was in the back, securing Monkley. I was about to join the others to buckle up for the landing, but before I could get out of there, we dropped like a stone. When I got free, they were dead, and fire was breaking out all over the place. Me and Monkley only just got out in time.'

Mitchum stared at the three charred remains. 'Mind if we get out of here?'

Foreman led the way, and Mitchum noticed the Luxotrol marker hanging on the wreck.

'Nice touch.'

'It was the least I could do.'

Mitchum stared back at the ship, shaking his head. 'Who the hell would do this? Why?'

'I've been going insane asking the same questions. Mike. There's something else. Something that could be connected.'

'What?'

'Ever since I got here, I've been trying to contact Earth. I couldn't reach them.'

'Those damn solar winds.'

'I know that now. I did get through, just briefly. I got hold of a cadet?'

'A cadet? What the hell was a cadet doing in the com room?'

'There was some bad shit going down. Farley, Cadet Farley, just happened to be passing the unmanned Com room, and heard my transmission. He said they were evacuating the I S F base. Then I heard an explosion, and I haven't been able to contact Earth since. The only other contact has been with you.'

'Damn. I had no idea. We put the lack of communication down to the solar winds. This is serious stuff, Andy. What the hell any of it means, I can't imagine.'

'If our ship going down was a deliberate act...'

'No doubt in my mind.'

'Then, it must be something to do with Mars. Do you think we're in danger?'

Mitchum stared at the ship. 'I wouldn't be surprised.'

^ Chapter 22

Foreman had been relieved to unburden himself to Mitchum. They agreed not to say anything to the others until Mitchum thought things through. He made one thing clear to Foreman, however. The Moonstruck was an unarmed vessel. It was a drilling operation, not a battle ship, plain and simple. Should anyone with a battle ship decide to invade Mars, their chance of survival was close to zero. Mitchum decided on two courses of action. To continue with the drilling and to try to establish contact with Earth, hopefully to arrange some protection, as soon as possible.

Foreman was agreeable to all that, but said he wouldn't be comfortable keeping things secret too long. He felt the others should be prepared, so that they could at least go down fighting. Mitchum said to give it one full day of trying to reach Earth, then either way, the others would be told.

Mitchum took Foreman back to the base, then set off to join the others at the driller. In the base, Monkley was carrying the clean laundry to the bedrooms. Foreman gave him a hand making the beds.

'It's official, pal. It was murder. Mitchum agrees with me.'

'Oooh!'

'Exactly.'

With the beds made up, they went to the communications room and Monkley turned on the radio before Foreman had even sat down.

'Show off. Right. Here we go again. This is Foreman. Andrew Foreman. I am calling Earth from Mars. Anyone there?' He waited a few minutes and repeated. He kept repeating for the next three hours. Several of Monkley's coffee's later, all he had heard was static. 'Not looking good, pal. But I tell you something for nothing. If some son of a bitch is coming here to finish me off, I'm not going quietly.'

Even as he said it, the words echoed in his mind like an empty promise, which without weapons of any kind, it undoubtedly was. The sight of the silent radio depressed him, and he had to get out of there.

When the crew returned from another hard day drilling, their mood seemed subdued. Foreman wondered if Mitchum had changed his mind and told them. He wouldn't have blamed him if he had. It was going to happen soon, anyway. The team were generally quiet during the evening meal.

'Everything okay, you guys?' Foreman asked, with a questioning look at Mitchum.

'Just been a tough day,' Mitchum assured him. 'We lost a drill tip.'

'These things happen,' snapped Debbie Warner. 'I can't be responsible for the unexpected lump of iron.'

'I never said you could, Debbie,' said Mitchum.

'I know you're thinking it, though.'

'I'm disappointed, that's all.'

'You'll have more than one tip though, surely?' said Foreman.

'Yes,' said Mitchum. 'That's not the issue. The cost of one of those tips is well...let's just say a lot. The trouble is, the tip actually jammed and snapped off. That means, once we attach a new tip, we have to start a new bore hole. If we use the same hole, we hit the diamond tip lodged in the hole, we lose another tip. The only alternative is to start all over again in another spot. Which means everything we have done up until now, was a waste of time.'

'I see. But you couldn't have known about the iron lump, Debbie.'

Debbie shrugged. 'On Earth, we know what we are dealing with. Hardly any surprises. Mars is still an unknown entity. Our equipment only tells us what's down there up to a certain depth, and the amount of iron in the dirt tends to mask the signals, especially at any depth. Basically, we are drilling blind.'

'These things happen,' said Foreman, trying to be positive. It didn't have much affect on the crew. 'Just a suggestion. Have tomorrow off. Rest up a day and tackle it fresh.'

Mitchum laughed. 'Spoken like a true veterinarian. Sorry, Andy. But have you any idea about time clauses and penalties? For every day we are behind schedule, we lose bonus money. Too much delay and we make nothing. The Moonstruck belongs to the I S F, but we are contractors. The money looks very good on paper, but they have us over a barrel if we don't deliver.'

'I know what you said about insurance, Mike, but I'm more than willing to getstuck in with you if I can be of use.'

Mitchum shook his head and sipped the wine. 'We couldn't possibly risk it, Andy. Thanks all the same. If anything happened to you, I'd lose my licence, and I'd never work in the industry again. Thanks anyway.'

Susan got up. Even her beauty was faded by the weariness she felt. 'I'm too shattered to even shower. I'll be on my own tonight, Andy.'

'I understand,' said Foreman, trying to keep the disappointment out of his voice.

With all the available beds taken up, and Susan sleeping in Foreman's room alone, Foreman had no choice but to utilise the sickbay bed. He lay awake in the dark sickbay, missing Susan's warm body next to his. His mood was as dark as the room, and his mind filled with the danger they were in. That Mitchum had continued his operation after learning of the imminent danger from an unknown enemy, concerned about bonuses from a federation that could possibly have been destroyed, was a testimony to his work ethic and faith that they would live to claim their well deserved rewards. If they were going to be fighting for their lives, unarmed and probably outnumbered, he could think of no team of people he would rather face death with. With that sombre thought running through his head, he fell into a fitful and unsatisfying sleep.

Chapter 23

'Commander Storme. I know you and your toy soldiers back there are itching for action, but you keep asking, isn't going to make us get there any sooner.'

'Just making sure you haven't taken your foot off the gas, Captain.'

'See this,' said Captain Jack Tanner, tapping the consul. 'You might look at it as a simple speedometer, and in a way, it is. But it's all about ratio's. We can go faster, use more fuel. Never get back to Earth. Or, we can keep the velocity slash fuel ratio at this level, we not only get to Mars, but whoopee, we get back to Earth.'

Storme bent down to whisper in Tanner's ear. 'I don't like you, Tanner. Never have, never will. If any of my men used that tone with me, I'd personally throw them out of the damned airlock.'

Tanner smirked. 'Is that right, Storme? Let me just remind you one more time. My lieutenant and I are not your men, and should you decide to throw either of us out of the airlock, you'll end up floating off into space for eternity. Further more, I'm the captain of this ship and as long as I am, you will do as I tell you on my damned ship.'

'Is that right, Tanner? You know? Floating around in space for an eternity would be a small price to pay for seeing you float by the damn window, so stop tempting me.'

'And if you don't get off my flight deck in the next five seconds, I'll turn this turkey around and let you explain to the brass how the mission was aborted.'

'Tanner...'

'One...'

'One of these days...'

'Two....'

'You haven't heard the last of this.'

'Three...'

'Later, Tanner,' growled Storme, as he left the deck.

'Bye, bye,' said Tanner, with a self satisfied smile on his face.

'Unbelievable.'

'You said something, lieutenant Munroe?'

Tracy Munroe had had a belly full of the griping between the captain and the commander.

'Twenty one twelve and men still haven't evolved beyond cavemen. You just got fancier rocks to hurl at one another.'

'Hey. I didn't start all this animosity, okay?'

'You were banging his wife. Why the big ox didn't pull your head off with his bare hands when he caught you two together, I'll never know.'

'Yeah? Well the fact she's now shackled up with me, should tell you something. You drive the bus. I'm going for forty winks.'

With Tanner out of earshot, Munroe mumbled. 'That's damn well it. The minute we get back to Earth, I wanna transfer.'

Chapter 24

The explosion was carefully controlled and expertly executed. Debbie Warner waited for the red dust to settle and went over to the crater she'd created. Behind her, the mini-dozer rumbled closer.

'Any good?' Giavani asked.

'Come and see.'

Giavani jumped down and joined her. She was holding a dull silver lump in her hand, the size of a grape.

'It doesn't look like much,' said Giavani.

'This little bit of Marilium is worth a weeks salary.'

Giavani shook his head. 'Four times the value of gold.'

'You're out of date, Pete. It's five times the value of gold, now.'

'In that case, we'd better get moving and make some real money for a change.'

'Okay. Scoop up the loose stuff and spread it on the ground, as thin as you can get it. I'll collect the Marilium.'

Giavani jumped back in the dozer. One hundred yards away, Mitchum, Redcliff and Hancock were working the driller. The second bore hole was going well in the softer patch of rock. The crane was manoeuvring another tube in place. Giavani drove forward, scooping up the blasted dirt and rock into the front loader, then he reversed and drove over to Warner and spread the load in front of her in a thin layer. Even from where he sat he could see the Marilium chunks in the red dirt. A rough mental calculation put the value at a million credits. He whistled happily as he scooped and layered another ten loads, each richer in Marilium than the load before. He jumped down and helped Warner with the harvesting. After an hour, they had collected over one hundred pounds of the precious ore.

'I could actually kiss you, Debbie.'

'I'm sure your wife would have something to say about that.'

'When she sees our bank account, she'll want to kiss you, too.'

'You can both save your affection for later. Take the containers back to the ship and I'll set another charge.'

Giavani placed the containers in the front loader and set off for the Moonstruck. He drove up the ramp at the back of the ship and up to the end of the storage bay. He picked up the precious cargo and stacked the containers together, strapping them securely to the shell. Then he placed another two empty containers in the front loader and drove back to where Warner was again waiting for the red dust to settle.

Chapter 25

'You guys look happier.'

'We hit a sweet spot, Andy,' said Mitchum. 'Pure luck. Debbie found a high point of the water reservoir, that would take us roughly central to the deeper part of the cavern. And our good fortune was that it was just dirt and small stones all the way. Like a knife through butter.'

'You broke through?'

'About an hour ago. All we need to do now is to connect the delivery pipe, and we only have to connect it to the existing pipe, flush it all out with the fresher water, test it and job done. If it works as well as we hope it does, the need to change filters should be an annual job. Cheers.'

They all raised their glasses. The sweeter wine was becoming more acceptable with each sip.

'So, we'll be taking off for Earth soon?' Foreman asked.

'I haven't decided,' said Mitchum.

'Why the hell not?' asked Hancock.

'Have you told them?' said Foreman.

'What's going on, Mike?' asked Susan.

'I've been putting it off telling you. There's no easy way of saying it, so I'll just tell it how it is. Andy's ship was sabotaged. It was brought down with a small explosive charge being planted in the controls.'

'What?' gasped Debbie. 'Are you sure?'

'I saw the hole the explosion made. Nothing else could have done it. Andy told me there was a small explosion just before the ship crashed.'

'But that's murder,' said Giavani.

'Correct,' agreed Mitchum.

'I think, and Mike agrees with me,' said Foreman, 'That the ones responsible have some plan involving Mars.'

'And they could possibly be heading our way to do what ever it is they plan to do,' added Mitchum.

'And you only decide to tell us now?' said Susan.

'Andy and I have been trying to contact Earth and send for help, or at least find out what the hell is going on.'

'And...?' Hancock demanded.

'We still can't get through. Those solar winds must still screwing up the radio signals.'

'There's something else you should know,' said Foreman. 'Just before I contacted your ship, I got through to Earth. A cadet named Farley answered. They were in the middle of evacuating the I S F base. I heard an explosion, and then nothing. I've not been able to reach Earth since.'

They sat in silence contemplating all that information and its ramifications.

'So what is it?' Giavani asked. 'Some weird revolution? Something that involves Mars, too?'

Mitchum said, 'Pete. You now know as much as Andy and I. Sorry. I should have told you sooner.'

'Damn right you should,' snapped Susan.

Joe Hancock said, 'My guess is if they come here, they'll come armed. What do we do? Throw rocks at them?'

'I have my gun,' said Mitchum. 'Just the regulation type I S F insist the commander carries. There are no weapons on this base. I'd be the first to fight to the death, but with nothing really to fight with, I don't fancy committing suicide by taking them on.'

'Me neither,' said Debbie.

Giavani said, 'Could we just take off and get the hell out of here? Take Andy with us?'

'It crossed my mind,' said Mitchum. 'The problem is, they would hunt us down and the Moonstruck is unarmed, like us. Also. Where would we go? We could be walking right into an

even worse situation on Earth.'

'I propose we stay and fight,' said Giavani. 'We have equipment and a few explosives of our own. As the engineer, I could make something useful.'

'Okay. You and Joe see what you can come up with. In the meantime, the rest of us will finish the water connections. Andy. Can you keep trying to call Earth?'

Foreman nodded. 'I'd be doing that, anyway.'

'I could sure use a smoke right now,' said Susan.

'The pool and a smoke might help us think this out,' said Mike.

Chapter 26

'I want the element of surprise,' Storme growled. 'I want you to put down at least two hundred miles away from the base. Keep the radar blocker on all the way in. We'll take the battle buggies from there to the base.'

'Okay,' said Tanner. 'As long as lieutenant Munroe and I are kept out of it, I couldn't care less where we put down.'

'Don't worry, Tanner. You're the last person I'd want armed, even on my team.'

Tanner laughed. 'Yeah. You're dead right. It would be too much of a temptation.'

Ignoring that remark, Storme said, 'Just do as I told you. Don't fly over the base, and land two hundred miles from it. Then you can stay nice and safe in here, while the real men get the job done.'

'A real man? That's not what Angie called you.'

Storme looked as if he were about to explode. 'When this is over, you and I will have a nice little chat somewhere. Just the two of us.'

'I look forward to it. Now get the hell off my flight deck, Storme.'

Storme gave Tanner a final fiery glare and returned to his men.

Lieutenant Munroe also gave Tanner a look. 'We should have a kiddies sandpit for you two to play in.'

'You're well out of line, lieutenant.'

'So fire me.'

Tanner unbuckled. 'Women. Just fly the damn bus, Munroe,' he said as he slammed the door of his sleeping quarters.

'Oh, yeah. Transfer.'

Chapter 27

Giavani scooped another load of red dirt and spread it on the ground.

'Not so much of it, this time,' he said.

'I think we've emptied the pocket,' said Warner. 'Not a bad haul, though.'

'Do you think its a common element here on Mars?'

Warner shrugged. 'Hard to say. It was pure chance we found this on our last visit. I'd say Marilium here is like gold on Earth.'

'Maybe we can come back and find more one day.'

'How many fortunes can you spend in one lifetime?'

'You don't know my wife.'

Together they collected the Marilium and filled the fifth container.

'This should do it,' said Warner. 'Flooding the market would be counter productive, anyway. You might as well add these to the collection. I'll go and see Mitchum.'

Giavani picked up the containers, and took them to the Moonstruck, then he secured them to the hull with the others. He stepped back and smiled. One containers worth each.

Worth...millions. Even his wife would struggle to spend it all.

* * *

'How's it going, Mike?'

'Good. Just a couple more connections, then job done. How about you?'

'Five containers filled. Giavani's taken the last to the ship. I think that's the last of it.'

'It was a useful little pocket. I'm thinking of buying a little Pacific island where I can lie on the beach at night and stare at the stars, and thank God I'm not spending half my life in a stinking space suit.'

'You don't fool me, Mike Mitchum. Out of all of us, you'll miss space travel the most.'

'Yeah. Then I'll sip another Martini and get over it. Grab hold of this pipe.'

Warner picked up one end of the Luxotral pipe and they carried it to Joe Hancock who was fitting a valve to the length of pipe in the new bore hole.

'Finished, Joe?'

'One more turn should do it. There. Now we just need to lower the pipes back in the water and the natural pressure should be enough to get a flow going. Once the air is out of the system, we can close off the valve, make the final connection, open the valve again and bingo.'

'Okay. Debbie. When Joe gives the signal, you operate the crane and lower the pipes.'

Debbie stood by the crane, ready to lower the pipes. Joe waved and she moved the slide control that lowered the crane head. At a slow and steady rate, the pipes were lowered into the water reservoir and a fountain of acidic water spurted out of the top. She kept lowering until Hancock waved to tell her it was at exactly the right height above the ground for the final pipe to be fitted. Avoiding the water gushing out of the elbow with the new valve on the end, Hancock turned the valve off, stopping the flow. Then he and Mitchum got the final pipe fitted in place.

'Now we can seal around the bore hole,' said Hancock.

Next to the bore hole was the sealer. Roughly the size of a human, the pressurised container of fast setting sealer was ready to inject the expanding resin into the gap between the pipe and the bore hole. This was to keep the pressure in the reservoir, to force the water along the pipes. Mitchum and Hancock wheeled the sealer in position and Mitchum held the nozzle probe in place as Hancock turned the sealer on. Hancock joined Mitchum to manoeuvre the nozzle all the way around the gap, fighting the back pressure. They didn't stop until the sealer was empty.

Mitchum high five'd Hancock. 'Okay. Gear away. All done.'

All the equipment was stowed away in the borer. Now, there was only one more thing to worry about.

Chapter 28

The Goliath settled in a huge crater, sending up a cloud of red dust. Storme made his final inspection.

'Right, you scrunts. You know why we are here. We have the element of surprise on our side, plus superior fire-power. I'm not expecting any resistance, but if we do, we'll deal with it. We are travelling at night over unknown terrain. Polaski. You'll drive Battle Buggy One. I'll be up front with you. Use lights until the last twenty miles. Slow right down at that point. We do not want to be trying to dig the beast out of a ravine. Got that, Polaski?'

'Yessir, Commander.'

'Pascalli. You'll drive Battle Buggy Two. Pratt. You be his eyes when the lights go out.'

'Yessir.'

'Get strapped in. And I don't mean tomorrow. MOVE!'

The battle buggies were all pressure sealed units, sixteen wheels, laser cannons mounted fore and aft, capable of travelling at ninety miles per hour, carrying nine fully armed troopers plus the drivers. Even being sealed, Storme made his men suit up. The terrain was too treacherous to take chances with.

Storme got in his seat next to the driver. He pressed the button on his radio.

'Tanner. Open the door.'

The entire back of the Goliath opened up to the Martian night sky.

'Bye, bye, shit head,' said Tanner.

'Later, Tanner. MOVE!'

The Battle Buggies rolled forwards, and there in front of them was the mighty Olympus Mons, the biggest mountain in the solar system. Rolling steadily along at forty miles per hour, both Polaski and Storme looked out for natural hazards. The buggies were tough and tested, but the Martian landscape was a mishmash of craters and ravines. The many sandstorms could easily fill a ravine, making them undetectable until it was too late. Only fools and men on a mission, like the uncompromising Commander Storme, would even contemplate driving two hundred miles at night. And only men whipped into shape by a leader like Storme would be crazy enough to follow him.

Chapter 29

'I haven't seen your GenMoP lately,' said Mitchum.

'I think he's in the jungle somewhere. I've a feeling the chimp in him is taking over. That was one of the reasons we are here. Just to see how would a GenMoP adapt to an environment like the base.'

Susan sipped her wine. 'If he becomes more like a chimp, it doesn't look like the experiment is too promising for using GenMoPs for space exploration. That's quite a few million credits down the pan.'

'Hmm. I can't say I'm looking forward to telling the brass, supposing there's a brass to tell anything to.'

'What will you do with him?' asked Giavani.

Foreman said, 'I think we have more serious and immediate problems to deal with before I need to worry about Monkley. Have you managed to make any weapons?'

Mitchum said, 'I think we have everything in hand. Not a bad meal, Andy. Not too much seasoning this time.'

'Don't change the subject, Mike. What have you got planned?'

'And spoil the surprise?'

'I don't like surprises. What have you done?'

A black cloud of oppressive silence suddenly dominated the conversation.

'Okay. Why don't I show you what we have planned? Come with me.'

'Lead on.'

As Foreman was about to leave the room, Susan grabbed his arm.

'Andy...'

'What?'

There was a pause. 'Nothing.'

Foreman kissed her and followed Mitchum out of the kitchen.

'Andy,' said Mitchum. 'Before I show you what we've done, I'd like to show you something in the water treatment room.'

'Can't it wait?'

'Hey. Humour me. Me and my team have sweat blood sorting this mess out. It'll only take a minute.'

'Whatever.'

Foreman followed Mitchum to the treatment room. 'So. What am I looking at here?'

'This.'

Foreman turned to face the gun in his ribs. 'Mike?'

'Why the hell didn't you just die with the others, Foreman?'

'You?'

'Guilty. For what it's worth, I feel bad about killing you.'

'You feel bad. Imagine how I feel.'

'Why don't we step outside? I'd hate to damage any of the plant.'

'How very noble of you.'

'Out.'

Foreman walked out the door, feeling the gun digging in his spine.

'Keep walking.'

Foreman went into the middle of the jungle.

'That's far enough.'

'Okay. I've been living on borrowed time. I see that now. But I got a right to know why.'

Mitchum shrugged. 'Nothing personal. Just business. Actually, I like you. I still have to kill you.'

'Thanks. I always wanted to be shot by someone who liked me.'

'Last trip out here, we not only found water, but we found also Marilium.'

'Never heard of it.'

'A new element recently discovered on Earth. I mean, rare as. But for microprocessors in super computers, priceless. It fetches unbelievable sums on Earth. We were digging the first bore and up came this shiny shit. Debbie analysed it and bingo. Marilium.'

'So why not just come and get it? Why kill innocent people?'

'My sponsors. They saw the potential right away. They could clean up, and me and my crew could retire filthy rich. They just didn't want the chance of goofballs like you and your pals stumbling on to what we found.'

'You planted the explosives on the ship?'

'Debbie did the deed. She's the explosive expert. You just decided not to die. Something I'm about to correct.'

'Tell me something. Does Susan know about all this?'

'We all do. She's a sweet girl. She decided before she even met you, you would go out with a bang, so to speak. Generous to a fault that girl.'

'Remind me to thank her.'

'Sorry, Andy. This is where it ends. If you have some kind of god, this might be a good time to say hi.'

'Let him go, Mike.'

'Susan. I told you to keep out of this.'

'Three people have already died. Let Andy go.'

'He knows too much. When a rescue ship gets here, they'll soon work out how they died. We'll get rid of Foreman's body out in the desert, somewhere. Then nobody can link it to us. It's the only way.'

Foreman said, 'But how can you go back to Earth with a war going on?'

'There is no war, Andy. We intercepted your radio signals. I pretended to be Cadet Farley. You haven't been able to reach Earth because we blocked you. We finished the water job simply as a cover. If anyone suspects us, they will see the work we've done. We'll tell them we didn't find anyone on the base when we got here and didn't find the crashed ship. You're just the last part to clear up.'

Susan said, 'Mike. There has to be another way.'

Hancock, Giavani, and Warner decided to join them.

'Tell Mike not to do this,' pleaded Susan. 'Debbie.'

'I was the one who planted the explosive. More than any of us, I'm the most responsible for what happened. I'll be the one banged up for life. We all will. Foreman has to die.'

'Pete?'

'Debbie's right.'

'Joe?'

'He's a loose end.'

'See?' said Mitchum. 'It's almost unanimous. None of you need to see this. Go away and let me do what I have to do.'

'Drop the gun, Mitchum.' For a big man, Commander Storme could move like a cat. From the surrounding jungle, twenty armed men appeared.

'Where the hell did you...?' Mitchum gasped.

'One of our agents on the moon found out your plan. We were too late to stop the murders, but we've been tracking you for months. Drop the gun, Mitchum.'

Mitchum grabbed Foreman around his neck and pointed the gun to his head. 'We're walking out of here. Follow us and I'll shoot Foreman.'

Storme shrugged. 'Go ahead and shoot him. I'm still taking you in.'

'Hey!' said Foreman.

Susan stepped forward. 'Drop the gun, Mike. It's all over. Let Andy go.'

'No. I'm getting out of here.'

Susan ran at him but the single shot from Mitchum's gun brought her down. She fell at Foreman's feet. Storme was about to make a move when from the trees above, a well aimed pineapple crashed down onto Mitchum's head. The gun fell out of his hand and he dropped like a stone. Monkley climbed down and jumped up into Foreman's arms.

'Thanks, pal.'

Chapter 30

The paramedic on Storme's team was satisfied with the condition of his patients.

'They'll both live, Commander.'

'Right.' He called two of his men over. 'Get Mitchum and the others suited up. I want off this planet within three hours. Foreman. I'll ask you one last time. Are you sure you want to stay here?'

'Positive. Monkley saved my life twice. The least I can do is keep my pal company. This is our home, now.'

'Rather you than me. We need your buggy to get everyone to our ship.'

'I'll come with you and drive it back.'

Three hours later, as dawn broke on Mars, the Goliath took off. Foreman and Monkley watched the huge ship disappear over the horizon. 'Well, that was interesting, pal.'

'Oooh!'

Three days later, Foreman and Monkley were eating breakfast together.

'Shit! Monkley. Suit up.'

Ten minutes later, Foreman was driving the buggy up the ramp and heading to the Moonstruck. It took another twenty minutes to find what he was looking for.

'It only just occurred to me, Monkley. The commander was too busy arresting people to think about the Marilium. Finders keepers, I say.'

'Oooh!' said Monkley.

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