

# ✧ **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 wag 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 CO<sub>2</sub> 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.

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