

Mayhem on Mars
A Quest Story by Mr Jefferies

"Then cruise at that speed directly to Mars. Hal 3000 - the onboard computer - will show you the way," instructed Professor Andrews in a rather serious tone. Lizzie nodded her head slowly and managed a slight, unconvincing smile on her face. It was shortly after 8pm on a balmy June evening and the two of them sat perched on the rusty steps of the famous Green Hill observatory that looked over the picturesque village of Waythorpe. The evening sky was filled with pretty streaks of pink as the sun was beginning to dip over the horizon and the trees of the surrounding woodland swayed gently in the warm breeze. Birdsong mixed with the distant sounds of traffic but aside from that, there was no other sound to be heard. When Professor Andrews had first revealed the existence of his experimental spacecraft and his idea that Lizzie - his number one pupil - should pilot it to the planet Mars, she had almost laughed out loud! Now, she simply sat there, frozen to the spot and understood that Professor Andrews was deadly, deadly serious. This was going to happen and when she met his eyes, she could see the excitement and anticipation bubbling away. "This is a quest like no other," Professor Andrews said. "A quest to discover whether there truly is life on Mars..."

Just over three days later, Lizzie was seated at the controls of the spacecraft powered by some of the most powerful and sophisticated engines ever created. The first time she had sat in the spacecraft's cockpit several weeks ago, she had felt too overwhelmed to take it all in and had not paid much attention to Professor Andrews' explanations of all the controls and dials and monitors. In fact, she had mainly wondered why he was not going herself. However, this was swiftly answered, as if she had read his thoughts. He would have to remain on Earth to oversee the mission and jam all the satellites which could detect the movement of his prize (and highly secret) spacecraft. How different it was all now though! Lizzie reveled in floating off her seat and bouncing herself from one wall to another and, when she eventually settled down, she gazed out of the cockpit window in amazement at the sheer amount of stars spread across the inky blackness of space. The sight of the Moon only increased her wonder and she tried to imagine what it would be like to walk across its dusty surface... Turning back to the flashing display of controls, Lizzie addressed the ship's computer, Hal 3000, directly.

"Are we close to Mars yet?"

"Miss Lizzie, Mars should be appearing on our screens within the next twenty minutes," replied Hal 3000 in a rather uninterested and monotone voice.

Lizzie settled further back into her chair and propped her feet up on the controls. "Well then, I think I'll take a short nap before we arrive." And with that, she closed her eyes and drifted off to sleep...

It wasn't the spacecraft's warning alarm nor the flashing red lights that awoke Lizzie but instead the voice of Hal 3000 which seemed to echo around the tubular walls of the spacecraft. She awoke with a jolt and found herself no longer in the comfortable control chair but almost pinned to the ceiling with her arms and legs dangling beneath her. In fact, she wasn't floating but stuck fast. Out of the cockpit window, Lizzie could only see - to her horror - an enormous

mass of red and orange which inched ever closer.

"W-w-what's happened? W-w-where are we?" Lizzie shrieked as panic flooded her body.

Hals' robotic voice answered almost immediately. *"I am afraid we have become trapped in Mars' gravitational field and we are now being pulled towards its surface. One of the ship's gravity sensors must have malfunctioned at some point."*

Lizzie recalled all she knew about the planet Mars from Science lessons at school. *"B-b-but Mars' atmosphere is deadly to humans! How would I would survive if the spacecraft managed to land?"*

"Ah, well, that's the problem. Unless we escape Mars' gravity, it will eventually just tear the spacecraft apart before we reach the surface. And even if we do reach it, you would almost certainly die instantly from the extreme cold and lack of oxygen."

Lizzie's heart skipped a beat. Why had she come all this way simply to perish in some far away corner of the solar system? Why had she taken the mission in the first place? Terror and despair filled her heart...

Powerless to stop it, Lizzie felt the spacecraft spiral ever closer to Mars' surface. She had pleaded with Hal 3000 to do something but the craft's computer simply replied that he had experimented with every idea and that now only sheer luck would save them from impending doom. As the spacecraft descended even further into Mars' deadly atmosphere, Lizzie felt herself becoming ever more dizzy and nauseous. As a result of Mars' gravity, she would soon lose consciousness and probably die before the craft was eventually torn apart. Besides, it would be better to go that way, not knowing and feeling nothing at all. Her vision became darker and she soon began to slip away. This was the last straw. It would all soon be over and then she would be part of the same dust clouds which drifted from galaxy to galaxy... Yet, all of a sudden, Lizzie felt the spacecraft stop and change direction. The sinking feeling gradually disappeared and little by little she began to drift down to the floor of the craft where eventually she lay on her back and gasped for breath. She could feel sweat pouring down her face and tears began to well up in her eyes. Was it a trick? Was she imagining it? Hal 3000 seemed to anticipate her questions and before Lizzie could speak, he said, *"Miss Lizzie, I managed to find a tiny gap in Mars' gravitational field and propel us forward at full speed. We should be completely free within the next two minutes."* Lizzie sank back to the floor filled with relief. She was saved.

"You do know that we shall have to put on hold our quest to explore Mars," stated Professor Andrews in a rather matter-of-fact way. Lizzie was now back within the familiar surroundings of Green Hill observatory and the pair of them stood gazing up through the hole at the night sky which sparkled with an infinite number of burning stars. The events of the mission now seemed unreal, as if they were part of some distant dream. Yet, when Lizzie closed her eyes, it all came flooding back to her and she seriously doubted she would ever volunteer for one of Professor Andrews' missions ever again. *"Of course, Professor Andrews. I'm sure we can wait a bit longer until we attempt it again."* But Lizzie had had enough of quests to distant worlds to last her a lifetime...