From Mars with love

He who dares ...

Julian Tang

"So children, what would you like to hear about today?"

The Old-Timer smiled down, benignly, at the 30-odd youngsters sitting cross-legged in front of him on the purple Martian grass.

"A story!" they yelled in unison, giggling and rocking about on their bottoms, knocking each other over.

The Old-Timer also started to laugh, but quickly stopped himself as he started to cough and splutter. With the weaker Martian gravity and greater distance from the Sun, the human colonists on Mars had increased their average life span to about 150 Earth years. Yet, even by these standards he was really old, being almost 200 Earth years now.

"OK, can anyone tell me when humans first came to Mars?"

There was a momentary silence then a few hands shot up. He pointed to a cute-looking girl dressed in a one-piece, silver dress.

"A very long time ago," she said with utmost seriousness and sincerity, looking up at him with big, round eyes.

"About the same time as you were born, Old-Timer!" a young boy, about six or seven years old, sitting beside her shouted out, cheekily. There followed some ill-concealed sniggers.

The Old-Timer looked at them, beaming and said: "Yes, you are both right! In the late twenty-first century, the first human finally managed to land on Mars. Scientists had managed to overcome the long journey time with some great advances in rocket technology, introduced by..." and he paused dramatically, "... by my father, then on Earth."

There was a hushed, respectful silence following this announcement.

"And does anyone know who the first astronaut to Mars was?" He looked around, hopefully.

Many of them shook their heads.

"Who was that, sir?" asked one of the older boys, finally, from the back row.

"Well, let's see now," said the Old-Timer appearing to think, carefully. "That first astronaut, well, that would have been me."

Another shocked silence followed.

"Really?" said the cute, big-eyed girl.

"Yes, really," replied the Old-Timer, looking at her kindly. "But there was a problem. After I returned, there must have been

something different about me. My wife said that she did not know me. Even I did not know who I was."

"What happened then?" asked the cheeky boy, curiously.

"Well, eventually, after about six months, I finally remembered who I was, and everything was OK. Then, I had to train other astronauts about how to return to a normal life on Earth — after more than a year alone in space!" he finished abruptly, with grin.

Instead of laughter, there was an unexpected silence.

Then with a realization the Old-Timer looked up at the sky and chuckled to himself. "Ah, yes, well, I guess none of you have yet been away from your friends and parents for so long," he said, smiling down at them again.

Many heads shook vigorously, seemingly in horror at the thought of this. There was another uncomfortable silence. It seemed that their earlier cheeriness had disappeared.

The Old-Timer sighed, looking at his watch. He could only keep the old memories away for so long. "OK kids, it looks like I've given you something a bit extra to think about today and I'm feeling a bit tired now. I'll make it up to you tomorrow, OK?"

The children murmured their acceptance and moved off in small groups, talking quietly among themselves. The Old-Timer looked after them, smiling wistfully. Maybe there was a future explorer among them yet.

But had they seen him a minute later, they would have seen his smile turn into a grimace, perhaps of pain, and then ... to something ... not quite human.

His face had turned the colour of red Martian soil, seeming to continually shift and reshape itself, like windblown sand swirling across his facial landscape.

He slapped his hands over his distorted face, gasping through clenched teeth, "No! Leave them alone! You will not escape! Not now, not ever! You destroyed life here once before and will not do it again. As long as you are within me, I cannot die and you cannot escape. I even had to kill her to keep this secret."

JACEY

A sob of deep human grief escaped the dustiness of his lips. "My beautiful wife," he whispered. "For that, you and I shall suffer for all eternity."

With this, like a signal for a temporary ceasefire, his face gradually returned to normal, lined and old, but fully human once more.

He looked wearily towards the distant, setting Sun, still remembering like yesterday, landing on this bare Martian soil, proudly making the first human footprint, and how this had awoken something in the red sand. Something that had waited for eons ... something that was old and hungry for life. It had passed through his suit without resistance, penetrating his skin, filling him up from the inside out. Yet, he had survived, contained and controlled it. He knew then that he had to return to Earth as if all was well, to stay alive and protect humanity. For if he had let himself die here, it would have escaped back into the red sand. Others would come after him, unsuspecting, to investigate. Others, who, unlike him, may not have been able to control it, from whom it would have spread to others, perhaps to every soul on Earth. It would have consumed them all, leaving Earth as it did Mars, a lifeless, desert wasteland.

This was his pain, his suffering, his penance, for his arrogance, his desire to be the first. Now, he must bear the burden, the curse of his achievement, until perhaps a future generation could relieve him of the monster that lived within him, and allow him, finally, to die in peace.

Julian Tang is a Singapore-based virologist, who, among other things, enjoys reading science fiction, fantasy and horror. He has many story ideas, but needs time to commit them to paper.