

ESP

Breakfast with the enemy.

BY JULIAN TANG

The interrogation room was a disgrace. Its once shiny titanium walls and floor were stained with patches of unidentifiable dried goo. Commander Maurice Gilet sat to one side, waiting. A loud clattering and the thud of heavy equipment announced the arrival of the prisoner outside the room's entrance.

The door opened and Maurice's old friend, head prison guard Bernard Marchand, entered carrying an e-clipboard. "Prisoner AX-5777, as requested, Sir. Just transferred from holding at the Virgin leisure colony on Maldives-592."

"Thanks, Bernard — you can drop the 'Sir,'" he grinned, weakly. It had been a long week. "This is our prime suspect in the Virgin cruiser explosion?"

"Yes, but you've not interviewed one of these before, have you? They're totally aquatic, so the translation unit has given it a human voice — you'll approve, I think." He gave a wink and backed out of the room.

Maurice walked round the large, cylindrical water tank that held his captive. He stared at the contents curiously, and not without some amusement. The prisoner looked like a giant sea anemone. He glanced at the translation unit hovering beside the glass to check that it was functioning correctly, and sat back down.

"Do you like what you see, Commander Gilet?"

They had given it the voice of Audrey Hepburn, his favourite actress of all time. Yet, rather disconcertingly, he had also heard the voice in his head. Then another strange thing began to happen. His image of the sea anemone in the tank wavered, blurred, then disappeared, to be replaced by an image of Audrey Hepburn herself, sitting elegantly on a stool in her famous black *Breakfast at Tiffany's* dress, complete with diamond necklace, long black gloves and cigarette holder. He could even smell the smoke from the cigarette, as well as her perfume.

"Or would you prefer this?" she purred.

Maurice leaned back in his chair and rubbed his eyes. What the hell was this? No one had warned him that these creatures were telepaths. He shook his head to clear it.

"May I remind you that this is an interrogation and that this conversation is being recorded?" He struggled to make his voice sound authoritative. "You were found, drifting, among the crash debris, in a specially

adapted survival capsule. Nothing else survived the explosion. We want to know what happened and if, and how, you were responsible. Many people died in this explosion, so if you refuse to cooperate fully, things may become... unpleasant."

Her seductive demeanour changed abruptly. "Commander, you are not in any position to caution me," she began in a tone of suppressed rage. "Your species has invaded our ecosphere purely for pleasure. The fact that the only intelligent life forms there are aquatic still does not permit the effluent from your 'terrestrial pleasure farms' to pollute our waters. Besides, you should be thanking me."

Maurice sighed and took the bait. "And why should we be doing that? Is this some sort of confession?"

She looked at him with an amused smile.

"Commander," she began casually, "as you've seen, with my telepathic ability I can quite easily make any member of the crew load an explosive device on board, effectively by-passing any security. Yes, this is a confession, but perhaps you might like to ask yourself — why?"

Despite his growing irritation, Maurice grudgingly waved her on.

"As you know, there are no terrestrial life forms on our planet. This is because we have an ancient parasite that infected and slowly mutated these life forms until they became sterile — ultimately making them all extinct. Eventually, it adapted itself to water, where we have been monitoring its evolution very carefully over many years. Quite frankly, we fear this organism.

"Unfortunately, your largely aqueous human body is an ideal host for this parasite. Since you started colonizing our planet, the creature has been reverting to a more terrestrially adapted genotype and phenotype. Obviously, the organism does not show up on your

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routine environmental scans, but we detected the first infected humans aboard this vessel. Infected terrestrial hosts



usually exhale the organism continuously, making for highly efficient airborne transmission. In time, it would have infected your whole population. We will not allow this parasite to spread to other worlds."

Maurice was stunned. "So, what are you saying? That you destroyed an entire cruiser as some sort of infection control measure? If you had discussed this with us when we first starting building these leisure colonies, we could have worked together to develop a cure or vaccine then!"

Her image shimmered slightly and she transformed into her all-black, *Funny Face* leotard. Pouting, she continued. "Well, let's just say that your commercial developers were not particularly amenable to such an open dialogue."

She paused, thoughtfully. "If we allow you to work with us on this, what about your environmental pollution? Although, admittedly the ammonia component

may be a useful contribution to our ecosystem, you will have to filter out the rest. Can this be done?"

Maurice briefly considered the request. "Yes, I will talk to the management. Given the alternative that you have very effectively demonstrated, I think they will listen."

She wasn't finished. Stretching languorously like a lean, black cat she added: "And you will, of course, limit the numbers of visitors?"

Maurice started laughing. They were not so different from humans, after all. "I'm sure that can be negotiated — given your particular talents."

"Well then, Commander, I think this is the beginning of a beautiful friendship."

And when he looked again, all he saw was a huge sea anemone with its tentacles gently waving in a large cylindrical tank. The translation unit was now sitting beside it, in sleep mode. ■

Julian Tang is a clinical/academic virologist, who still has many story ideas. He would like to dedicate this story to Audrey Hepburn, whose iconic elegance, although often imitated, has yet to be surpassed.

JACEY