

THE WHOLE TRUTH

by Piers Anthony

Science fiction resembles the detective story in many ways; the deepening mystery, the adventure, the chase, and—only too often—the corpse, all building toward the finally revealed ending. Here these elements are combined with another famous—or rather infamous—theme, that of the lady and the tiger. Piers Anthony presents us with a tiger-lady and asks us to solve the problem before he reveals the solution...

Unfortunately, the impersonal military regulations said, multiple-manned stations were not feasible at this time. Numerous learned articles had been published refuting the validity of this policy, but they were under civilian bylines and therefore ignored. That was why Leo MacHenry was a lonely man.

He had been warned that his imagination might conjure company from the vacuum, just to break the monotony of fourteen months of isolation. Such cautions were unnecessary; he knew better than to yield to hallucination. One million dollars was good pay even in the face of rampant cool-war inflation, for a single tour—but it would do him little good in the psycho ward. Thus he was cautious about crediting what he saw.

Still, it did look like a man. A live one.

The figure drifted directly toward the station, brightly illuminated by this system's nameless sun. Behind it were the stars, clear even in this seeming day because of the absence of obscuring atmosphere. An intermittent jet of gas shot out from the suit, suggesting the tail of a comet as the light caught it momentarily. Braking action; weightlessness was a far cry from masslessness, and a collision at speed with the station would flatten the visitor in ugly fashion.

Leo watched it through the small scope. What he saw was a standard UN space suit of the type suitable for survival-of-wearer up to four days in deep space, conditions permitting, and somewhat longer in a semiprotected situation. That was sufficient margin for rescue in most cases—if rescue were, according to the manual, feasible at all. Evidently there had been a wreck in space, and this survivor had been close enough.

And that was suspicious. Leo's station was mounted on a planetoid that orbited a numbered star far from Sol. Human traffic was sparse here. There was potentially valuable real estate in this system and Earth wanted to hold a lease on it so that other starfaring creatures would stay clear, but it would be years before proper development occurred. The odds against a human shipwreck here at this time, let alone a single survivor—well, it was improbable.

Yet this was persistent for a hallucination. His instruments picked up the visitor, and he was not given to misreading their signals. He had been on duty two weeks; the novelty was only now beginning to wear down, and in any event it was a little soon for cross-referenced mind-warping. It was now fairly safe to assume that what he saw was real, physically.

The odds remained bad, however. He had not wanted to think about the next most likely prospect, but now he had to. What he saw could be a Dep.

The Deps were an alien species whose stellar ambition matched Man's own. Their technology lagged slightly behind Earth's, but they made up for this by other abilities. Because they were GO star-system residents of an Earthtype planet, their needs were basically parallel to Man's, and that meant specific competition for choice worlds. A state of war did not exist currently, but the peace, to put it euphemistically, was uncertain.

The UN suit fired a last burst from its center of gravity—jokes were rife and obvious—and contacted the surface of the planetoid. It tumbled and bounced, the wearer not expert at this maneuver. Then it righted itself and attempted to walk toward the station.

Leo smiled grimly. Walking on a low-G rock was not the same as doing it on a smooth metal hull. Here the magnetic shoes had nothing to cling to, and friction with the surface was virtually nil. The figure rose slowly into the black sky rather than going forward.

Why hadn't he spotted the wreck? It should have been well within the range of his instruments, and the telltales should have Christmassed. That was another augury in favor of a Dep intruder: a deliberately landed spy. Though it was not like them to oversight such an important detail as a fake wreck.

The Deps: vernacular for Adepts, in turn the informal term for the species that could change its physical features at will to match those of any similar animal. Man was similar. Coupled with this was a certain force of personality that, it was said, caused the viewer to overlook minor discrepancies. Thus a Dep spy could be frighteningly effective. He looked like a man, and his faked identification seemed to check out. Even machine inspection was not always proof against error. Cases were on record where an identified Dep had been passed in spite of mechanical protest. The operator had been sure the device was malfunctioning, since the subject was obviously human.

Strenuous measures had been required to root out Dep spies from Earth's environs, and some innocent humans had been liquidated in the process. But the job had been done. Computerized laboratories were capable of identifying suspects and passing sentence, and were not affected by die subjective aura. The threat of Dep infiltration, while still present, was no longer serious. The suited figure finally got its bearings and made respectable progress toward *the* entry port. Leo Lad to make his decision soon.

Space was large, suit-range small. Human survivor of unobserved wreck: thousand-to-one odds against? Million-to-one?

On the other hand, how about a Dep infiltration attempt, here and now? Maybe only ten-to-one against.

He could blast the human-looking figure where it stood. He had more destructive power under his thumb than Man had been capable of imagining through most of his history. He could devastate men, ships and even small planets. He was the guardian of this system, equipped to make intrusion by aliens entirely too costly to be worthwhile.

But suppose the visitor were legitimate? Overwhelming as the odds against it were, *it was* possible. Should he risk murder?

The visitor was at the port. He could not ignore it. A human would soon die out there, as the suit ran down; an alien would arrange somehow to sabotage the station.

It would be safer to blast it. His duty required that he act with cognizance of the odds. Nothing should jeopardize Earth security.

Yet—he was lonely. Two weeks had impressed him forcefully what fourteen months would be like. If he blasted now, he would not know whether he had done right or wrong. Not for thirteen and a half months, when the relief ship took in the frozen toasted fragments and analyzed the flesh.

Loneliness was bad, but that grisly uncertainty would be worse. And if the body were human...

He was fairly secure, physically. He could admit the visitor and make his own investigation. He would be reprimanded, of course. It was not his business to take chances.

He was lonely. His resistance to temptation was not that good. He pressed the stud that opened the lock.

The figure entered. The port swung shut, resealed. Air cycled into the chamber. Now Leo could talk to his guest without employing monitored radio.

"Identify yourself," he said. "You have fifteen seconds before I fry you with high voltage."

Muffled through the helmet, the nervous reply came: "Miss Nevada Brown, colony ship Expo 99. Please don't—fry me!" A woman! . . .

Nonplussed, he drew his hand back from the incinerator control. He had not been bluffing. Whatever language the visitor spoke, human or alien, the meaning of his challenge, would have been clear. No person got into space without becoming aware of the hairtrigger reflexes of station operatives.

Those reflexes were sadly disordered now! A man he could have dealt with. A woman—how could he kill her? Even if she were a Dep—and this was distinctly possible—it was hardly in him to—to do what was necessary. Spaceships he could blast; women, no. His conditioning was not that good.

"Take off your suit and deposit any weapons on the shelf," he said, trying to restore gruffness to his voice. Weapons? The weapons a woman wore were part of her body. "I'm watching you." And he remembered belatedly to turn on the screen. He really was shaken.

Obligingly she stripped the bulky segments away. The process took some time, since a UN suit was intended to be safe, not convenient. He noted with guilty disappointment that she was adequately covered underneath. Some people wore their suits nude, to facilitate circulation of air and heat

A woman! Human or Dep? On the verdict hung months of delight or torment worse than either loneliness or guilt. If she were really from a colony ship—Hands quivering, he punched for information from the register. *Expo 99* : WORLD'S FAIR, LOCATION MADAGASCAR, 1999. ATTENDANCE, CUMULATIVE, 42,000,000 PAID. POINTS OF SIGNIFICANCE—

He cut it off and punched a correction. It was the *Ship* he wanted.

In the interval the girl had emerged from her suit. She was a young brunette, slender rather than voluptuous, and not shown to best advantage by the rumpled coverall she wore. Her hair was quite short, in the fashion of most women who went to space—apart from so-called entertainers—and her ears stuck out a bit. Not the kind he would have looked at even once, back on Earth with his million-dollar retirement fund.

But this was not yet Earth. This was isolation for another thirteen and a half months, while his station

orbited its numbered sun and at length returned to a favorable orientation for rendezvous. For that lean period, *any* woman would be lovely, particularly a young one.

Any human woman.

He looked at the register's message: DATA INSUFFICIENT.

Leo punched a clarification, but he already knew what it meant. There was no such ship. The girl was a phony.

Incinerate her?

She was pathetically fragile in her tousled state, and breathing rapidly from nervous energy. She was well aware of her danger.

It flashed through his mind: *even a Dep female would be company* .

He released the inner lock and admitted her to the station.

He met her in the comfortable day room. She was still unsteady in the gravity field, after her time in free-fall. Her shoulders and breasts sagged slightly, as though they had lost their tonus in space. She had tried to straighten her outfit, to make herself presentable; but a moment of primping could hardly undo days of suit-confinement. Particularly when the natural attributes were modest. As a pinup she was not that good.

"Sit down," he said curtly, refusing to address her by name.

"Thank you." Grateful but not graceful, she took one of the overstuffed chairs. The station was small, but the day room was intended to be as homey as "feasible," to mitigate the starkness of the duty.

"I believe you are an agent of an alien power," he said. "Specifically, you are a Dep spy."

Her mouth opened. She wore no lipstick or other makeup, such things not conducive to survival in space. Her eyes were shadowed by fatigue, not artifice. Her teeth were subtly uneven. He knew her for an alien creature, yet every detail was painfully human.

"Hold your comment," he said, preventing her from speaking. He knew he had to do this rapidly or his nerve would break. He was not a military man, though for this single tour he was subject to military regulations. Discipline in the soldier-sense was more a sometime concept than gut-reality to him. "My name is Leo MacHenry and I have no Scottish or Irish blood that I know of. I am a civilian mercenary on duty for fourteen months, most of which lie before me. I am being well paid for this service because personality tests indicate that I am more likely to survive with my wits intact than a conventional soldier would be. I mean to complete my tour honorably and retire to rich living and overindulgent amours for the ensuing fifty years.

"I am keyed in to this station in such a way that I cannot leave it even to walk the surface of the planetoid without destroying it and myself. Only the relief ship has the equipment to re-key for the next observer. My brain waves are continually monitored by the main computer. If they stop—that is, if I should die or suffer some drastic mental change, such as entering a drugged state—the computer will detonate this station immediately. The radius of total destruct is well beyond the distance any person could travel in a space suit because of needle shrapnel and lethal radiation. There are other safeguards of more devious

but effective nature. My point is that I am to all intents and purposes invulnerable here. I made you leave your weapons"—she had had a heatbeamer and a knife, both standard for a UN suit—"only to prevent you from attempting anything foolish before I had a chance to talk to you. I may look ordinary, but any serious attack on me will bring your demise or our mutual destruction. This in turn will summon a competent Earth-fleet ready and eager for trouble.

"I run this station. No other person can do so much as open a door except at my direction, because of the electronic and neural keying. You cannot leave, you cannot obtain food, you cannot even use the sanitary facilities without my cooperation. I intend either to execute you or to hold you here until the relief ship arrives, at which point I will turn you over to the appropriate authorities for interrogation and probable liquidation.

"I will, however, give you one chance for freedom, since your presence here will be a severe blot on my record. If you wish to leave right now you may do so; I will let you take off in your suit and return to your compatriots with the news that my station is in business for the duration. I suggest that you accept it; it is an easy way out for both of us."

He turned his back on her to hide his own nervousness. He had done it. He had made his speech, and it was all true, except that his discipline was not that good. Not that good at all. He could let her go, but if she decided to stay he—even if she were a Dep spy—He was lonely and, suddenly, woman-hungry. He would try to keep her prisoner, but inevitably come in time to treat her less as a suspect and more as—as what she seemed. Already he was sorely tempted. Perhaps that was what the Dep command had counted on. That he would penetrate the ruse but submit to a gradual, emotional subversion. A year was plenty of time to do the job. A year of propinquity, and he would no longer care. He would have a new loyalty. After that—

She looked up at him. "I—I don't know what to say, Mr. MacHenry. Except that I'm not—what you said. I don't know why you don't believe me. But I can't go. My ship isn't there any more. I—I didn't want to say this because I'll get in trouble, but I—jumped ship, and it went on without me. I knew I was breaking the law, but it was my only chance. To get back to Earth. So I guess you'll have to lock me up, if that's what you want."

She was going to play it out, and she was letter-perfect! He felt, oddly, relieved. Her departure would have been a confession of guilt, and he would have had to shoot down the alien ship the moment he spotted its location. This way there was at least a chance she was real. A chance he knew he was foolish to hope for. The subversion was proceeding too rapidly, but he was helpless to inhibit it because his will to do so was uncertain. "Your ship wasn't wrecked?" he asked. "The—Expo 99?"

"Did I say that?" She was prettily surprised. "I meant the *Exton 99*. We called it Expo, but that was just slang. Yes, it couldn't hang around for a solitary deserter, and—"

Leo left her in mid-sentence and strode to the control room. He punched for the revised designation.

Exton99: ONE OF A SERIES OF COLONY SHIPS BOUND FOR THE SO-CALLED ADEPT SPHERE PERIMETER, PERSONNEL SELECTED BY INVOLUNTARY LOT—

Ouch! That was one of the press-gang fleets that filled their complements by pseudo-random drafts on the labor force. Volunteers for adverse locations were few, so this was a legalized piracy of talent similar to the old-time military service call-ups during the frequent wars-to-end-wars. Somehow the rich or influential seldom got called: another time-honored corruption. Graft or draft was the word. Selection for such an expedition meant a lifetime of hard service and a death on some frontier world for the unhappy

recruit.

Yet politically it was sound. It eased unemployment on Earth while strengthening the planet's galactic posture. New worlds had to be tamed and developed, and this system accomplished it on a crash basis. The volume of space Leo's own station guarded would eventually be colonized this way. The majority of the voters were beyond the age or health of eligibility, so from their safety approved the draft.

Democracy, as the exported minority discovered, was not invariably fair. Leo had obtained his exemption by qualifying for his present tour, but he retained no sympathy for the system. It was merely yet another form of involuntary servitude.

No wonder Nevada Brown had jumped ship when she had a chance! Life on Earth was crowded but affluent; life elsewhere was grim. She must have watched for her opportunity and made her move when the ship slowed for a course correction. Colony ships seldom proceeded directly to their destinations, since it was dangerous to pinpoint these for enemy observers. The "enemy" constituted obstructive families of draftees as well as competitive alien species.

He owed an apology to his guest. She was human.

Oh-oh. This was the way the Dep influence worked. He had been well briefed on this. While Nevada stood in the airlock he had verified that her given identification was spurious. Now that he had talked to her directly, he had changed his mind. It was too easy to call his first assessment an error. It had been an objective one, while what followed was more likely to be subjective. He had wanted to believe her story, and had substituted the name of a real ship for the one she had invented.

Though why she hadn't given him a real ship the first time, when the Dep researchers had surely had the information. . .

He returned to the day room, perplexed. Nevada had not moved. She was still rumped, legs slightly bowed, nose a little too long, not homely so much as imperfectly pretty. Even her youth did not become her particularly; she had not yet mastered the studied grace of the experienced woman, the flair for accenting the desirable and phasing out the undesirable.

All of which argued in her favor. A Dep courtesan would have been a beauty, since all her details would have been under control. Nothing about her would rankle.

Yet—he was alert for the Dep perfection. So it stood to reason his suspicions could best be allayed by token imperfections. . .

Yet again: she *could* be valid. Her story was now a good one, that he could not disprove. He had figured the chances for a human shipwreck here. But a deliberate desertion in the vicinity of a manned observation station, by a colonist with a legitimate grievance—that was far less improbable. Perhaps only ten to one odds against. The same as those against overt infiltration by a Dep spy, by his crude reckoning. That evened the odds; she was as likely to be human as Dep.

Except that a Dep would naturally present him with a convincing story.

What was he to believe? He *wanted* , to accept her as human. That would be so much simpler and so much more pleasant. But he stood to lose fortune, life and mission if he made a mistake. The wrong mistake.

The right mistake, of course, would be to kill her and discover subsequently that she had been human. He would not be held culpable in the circumstances.

She continued to sit there, watching him with brown eyes but not speaking. The odds were with the execution—murder—but he just wasn't that reasonable.

He could obtain accurate odds for all eventualities by punching for them, but he preferred to settle this his own way. The consequence of his decision would fall on his head and soul, not the computer.

"I am not sure about you," he said at last. "You may be human and you may be Dep."

Again he wondered whether the mistake of accepting a Dep lover might not be worth it. There was subtle and unsubtle fascination about—

"I can tell you about myself," she said eagerly. "Where I was born, who my folks are—things no alien could know—"

"Forget it. I wouldn't know them either. You could make up anything."

'Couldn't you look it up in your computer? Doesn't it list everything that—'

The register is encyclopedic, not omniscient," he said sharply. "It has every fact I might reasonably need or want to know—but it can't list every teen-age girl in the overpopulated world."

"I'm twenty-two," she said, offended. "They don't draft you un til you're—"

"Anyway, the name, even if listed, wouldn't prove a thing. A Dep would research it before coming here."

"Oh." She pondered a moment, still justifiably nervous. "But there must be things I know that you could verify that an alien couldn't. I've spent my life on Earth, after all. Maybe we know some of the same people and—"

"No. The only things I could verify that way would be suspect because *Idid* know them. I would think you had told them to me, but actually I would be picking them out of my own memory."

She stared at him, her small chin rumpling as though she were about to cry. "You mean—I can't use anything you don't know, because I can't prove it, and I can't use anything you *do* know because—?"

"Yes. So I'm afraid I'm going to have to"—she stiffened—"hold you prisoner, until the ship comes." He was a ludicrous weakling; he should have simply shot her. In fact, he was admitting defeat, if she were a Dep. It might mean the destruction of the station, or his own betrayal of his world, but he simply lacked the fortitude to do what was necessary. He was not that good a guardian.

"Oh. I thought you were going to—I guess that makes sense, though. To turn me over to the authorities, I mean, since you can't be sure." Her relief was pitiful. She knew now that she wouldn't be killed, whichever way it went.

She stood up. "A Dep would know—enemy secrets, or something, too. So it would be right. I guess I should go to the cell now, I hope it's clean."

"There is no cell. You'll have to use this room." And a Dep would have known *that*, too.

She looked around, comprehending. "Oh."

I'll reprogram the life-services equipment to provide for your needs. You'll have to ask me for any reading matter you want, and I'll have printouts made. Most of what we have here is technical, though. The station wasn't set up for—entertainment."

"But what will you do?" she inquired with half-coy solicitude. "I mean, you can't stay in the control room all the time, or in the storeroom, or whatever."

He shrugged.

"But it really makes *you* more of a prisoner than—" she cried, breaking off unfinished.

In more ways than one, sister! "Nevada, it *would* be convenient if there were some way to determine for certain what you are," Leo said. "Even an inconvenient way. But there isn't since I don't have a lab here. So we'll just have to make do—unless you want to leave *now* ."

"I guess I should," she said. "But I'd die, and my willpower is not that good. Isn't there *any* way to—" Her eyes brightened suddenly. "You say the ship isn't coming for over a year?"

Leo nodded. "Barring a blowup."

"And I'll just have to stay here until they can identify me for sure? And if I'm human it's all right, but if I'm alien, trying to sneak into Earth's defenses, they'll kill me?"

"Close enough. I explained all that before. You aren't going to accomplish anything if you're a spy, so you might as well quit. If you go now, you can save your life and my reputation." But he was bluffing.

"So it really doesn't make any difference what happens until the ship comes," she said excitedly. "Except that it would be a lot nicer if I could prove to you I'm human" She was smoothing herself out now with motions more suggestive than practical.

"Yes. But if you're thinking of the classic 'proof,' it's no good. A Dep can make sex too. Better than a real woman, they say. That changes nothing."

"You're wrong," she said with new confidence. "Give me a few days to—to get to know you. Then I—I'll prove it. Really prove it. It'll be rough, but you'll see."

The reliefship captain was shocked. "You admitted an intruder?"

Here near the Dep frontier? Do you realize what this means?"

"I realize," Leo said. "It was a chance, but I'll gladly stand court-martial for what I did. But I intend to introduce in my own defense evidence that I kept good watch and even repelled an alien probe that might ordinarily have overcome the station and made this entire system hostile to Man. They were going to radiation-bomb it, you see, so we couldn't develop it for centuries. I think they're getting desperate, to try that. That should count for something."

"Repelled a probe?" The captain seemed to have been left behind.

"A Dep fleet that meant business. Less than a month, ago. They fired saturation missiles, trying to knock out this station first. Must have cost them a fortune. I would never have nullified them all if Nevada hadn't acted as an additional spotter. She called them off by coordinates, so I was able to devote my full attention to gunning them down. Quadrupled my efficiency. Good thing, too; it's tricky trying to intercept meteor-shower type shells. The Deps hadn't expected a coordinated defense to their surprise attack."

"Of course not," the captain said. "That's an overt act of war—unless they managed to cover it up somehow. It changes the whole picture. But why should a Dep spy help you to—why, obviously she had been sent to incapacitate you in advance."

Leo grinned, "I could say my charm converted her to my side, but it wouldn't stick. She's *shuman*. I verified that. I knew I could trust her, and we had a lot to fight for."

"Mr. MacHenry, there is no way you could have been sure of that. You have no laboratory. The Deps are unexcelled at disguise and indirection."

"On the contrary. We have the very best laboratory. The one no alien can fool. All it takes is—" He was interrupted by the sound of a baby crying. The captain didn't make the connection immediately. "I tell you the Deps are too good at—" Then he paused, mouth open.

"Not that good, Captain. They can't hide the *whole* truth," Leo said, smiling with something more than victory. "Which reminds me. It will be your privilege to perform the ceremony for Nevada and me, now that the job is done. I want little Nev to have a proper name, and naturally my wife will be entitled to remain with me on Earth."