

True Faces
by
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"I told you I wasn't in the mood for this," Stilton whispered.
I gave him an elbow in the ribs without looking away from the body of the woman lying on the floor of the large room. I'm never much in the mood for a strangulation murder myself, but it didn't pay to advertise. Not in this company. History, I thought; I'm looking at history, in the making right there in front of me. People had been strangled before, and they'd get strangled again, but this was the first time one had ever been strangled in an alien embassy. The first alien embassy, no less. Two firsts. And we were the first law enforcement officers on the scene, so that was three firsts. The day was definitely running hot.
On my other side, the tall man in the retro-tuxedo swallowed loudly for the millionth time. He'd said his name was Farber and given his occupation as secretary to the dead woman. I wasn't sure which was more striking, his old-fashioned get-up or his noisy peristaltic action. I'd never met anyone who could swallow loudly before--did that make it five firsts? I shoved the thought aside. The room was so quiet, I probably could have heard him digesting his food if I listened closely enough. The Lazarians either observed quiet as a religion, or they were as much in shock as the human employees, who were all huddled together on the far side of the room, too spooked even to whisper to each other.
There was only one Lazarian on this side of the room. The rest were gathered in a semi-circle around the corpse. There were about twenty of them and the grouping had this very odd formality to it, as if they'd all gathered there to seek an audience with the woman.
I turned to Farber, who reacted by swallowing again and then blotting his forehead with his sleeve. "One more time?" I gave Stilton another jab in the ribs.
"Ready," Stilton said sourly, moving so that I could see he had the interviewer aimed.
"Migod, I always thought it was just in the hollies that the police made you tell a story over and over," Farber said, glancing at the 'viewer's flat lens in a furtive way. I didn't make anything of that--the only people who never got nervous about having a 'viewer trained on them were dead or inhuman. Of course, it was hard to tell with the Lazarians--they looked a lot like scarecrows and I'd never seen a nervous scarecrow, or even an extraterrestrial facsimile.
"You can give us the viewer's digest condensed version," I told him. "The third recording doesn't need as much." Farber swallowed. "Fine. I came in here and found Ms. Entwater just as you see her now, with the Lazarians gathered around her. Just as you see them now. The other human employees were elsewhere in the building but the one Lazarian rounded them all up, brought them in here, and hasn't allowed anyone to leave since. Then I called you. From here. Since I'm not allowed to leave, either."
I glanced at Stilton, who nodded. "And you say that Ms. Entwater's relationship with the Lazarians was...what?" Swallow. His adam's apple bounded up and down above his collar. "Cordial. Friendly. Very good. She liked them. She liked her work. If she had any enemies among the Lazarians, she never told me about it and she told me close to everything."
"Care to speculate on what she didn't tell you?" I asked.
He thought about that for a moment, swallowing. "She didn't tell me there was a Pilot in the building."
"Why not?"
"Either she didn't have a chance or she didn't think to." Swallow. "It's hardly necessary for the secretary to be updated hourly as to who drops by for a social visit and who doesn't."
"You're sure it was a social visit?"
Swallow. "Pilots come by all the time to visit the Lazarians. The Lazarians trained them in Interstellar Resonance Travel, so they feel a certain kinship to them, much more than to other humans, I think."
"Why do you think that?" I asked.
"Because they seldom have any interactions with any of the humans here. Except for Ms. Entwater, who sees them in and sees them out again." Swallow. "Saw them in. And out again."
"She always did, personally? Isn't that more of a job for a receptionist or a secretary?"
"Dalette or I would see to other visits. The Pilots Ms. Entwater always saw to personally."
"Then she wouldn't have had to tell you in so many words that a Pilot was in the building," I said. "You'd know by whatever she was doing."
Swallow. "If I knew what she was doing. I was busy with press releases for most of the morning, so I was in the translation room."

"The Lazarian's press releases?"

Swallow, followed by a nod. "They like to alert the media themselves. About everything. Today it was various things about hollies they'd seen and what they thought about them and the dissolution of three-bond-"

"Wait a minute," I said. "You didn't mention that before." The old ways never failed. Get someone to tell a story over and over and something new was bound to show up.

Swallow. "I'm sorry. I wasn't hiding it-" a glance at the 'viewer "-I'd just forgotten. It's like a-a marriage breaking up, or maybe a long engagement. The Lazarians are-well, there are similarities, but there are always strange little differences embedded in them. In any case, it didn't concern Ms. Entwater."

"Are you sure?" I said.

"Absolutely." Swallow. "Ms. Entwater never, ah, intruded into their private lives."

I couldn't help laughing a little. "Come on. Celie Entwater's job was to gain improved understanding of the Lazarians. How could she do that unless she was acquainted with their private lives?"

"Ms. Entwater considered herself a diplomat engaged in deep study of another culture. She was rigorous in observing customs and taboos, all that sort of thing. She knew that if we offended them, they might close down and go back to Lazarus-"

"Lah-ah...ZA-AHR...eesh," came a deep, nasal-sounding voice behind me, enunciating each syllable as if it were a separate word, with a bit of a gargle on the ZA-AHR.

Farber swallowed and bowed from the waist. I turned around. The one free-ranging Lazarian in the room was standing as close as possible to Stilton, who rolled his eyes. The Lazarian custom of space-density had gotten old for him very quickly. I found it pretty off-putting myself-it was like dealing with a race of people who had been raised in crowded elevators, unable to be comfortable unless they were all on top of each other.

Which made the half-circle formation around Entwater's corpse doubly odd, I thought suddenly. They weren't as close to each other or to her as they could get. Because she was dead? Or some other Lazarian reason I had yet to find out?

"I need to question all the humans here," I said to the Lazarian. "If one of them killed Ms. Entwater, that person must be punished according to our law."

"Trrrrried and punished if found guilty," the Lazarian corrected. "Question."

Farber moved to my side, swallowing. "Thinta-ah requests permission to inquire something of you," he said to me, sounding ceremonial. I repressed the urge to sigh heavily; I'm no diplomat, and the six years I'd spent on the gang squad had made me tired of ritual. Maybe it should have prepared me for the more byzantine protocols of extraterrestrials, but I've got a bad attitude. Twenty years ago, when the Lazarians had first arrived, maybe I'd have been much more excited, but then, I've always had low blood pressure anyway.

"Ask your question," I said.

"Say 'please,'" Farber whispered.

I smiled as broadly as I could. "Please."

The Lazarian put its six-digit hands on top of its sack-like head. "If Entwa-ahter is dead by one of us, wha-aht then?"

I glanced at Entwater again. From this distance, it was hard to see the details of the marks on her throat, but they could have been made by one of those Lazarian hands. One would have been enough-like the rest of their limbs, those digits were long and multi-jointed, and could have gone all the way around a human neck easily. "This is your embassy," I said, "which means to us, it is a piece of your nation. We would trust you to serve your own justice in this matter."

Stilton was looking at me like I was crazy. I didn't blame him. All of a sudden, I was talking like a hollie version of a diplomat. I couldn't help it; something about the Lazarians was making me go into awkward-formal mode.

The Lazarian put a hand on top of the 'viewer, much to Stilton's shock. "Truth ma-ah-chine."

I gave Farber a sidelong glance. "What now?"

Farber swallowed twice. "It would seem that Thinta-ah wants you to use the 'viewer on them." He gestured at the Lazarians standing around Entwater.

Stilton coughed. "I don't think it'll work. We're-ah-" he turned to the Lazarian "-we're too different." I could tell he was trying to imagine how those sackheads would register. The 'viewer worked on interpreting a lot of little things-facial expression, blood flow, temperature, eye and muscle movements, pulse, respiration, vocal quality and inflection, choice of words, context, and some other things I didn't have to bother remembering. It wasn't infallible, we'd all been told, but in my experience, I have yet to see anyone beat it, not even the most hardened pathological liars. We were only allowed to use it to determine probable cause for search and/or arrest, not to

determine official guilt or innocence, so it wasn't any more admissible in court than the old lie detector results had been, but it was useful enough.

"Can converrrrt," said the Lazarian. "Ha-ahve progra-ahms to converrrrt for our species."

Stilton held the 'viewer protectively close to his chest, giving me a desperate look.

"I don't know," I said. "I'd have to call-"

Farber swallowed. "Weren't you told to take every measure necessary to wrap this up as quickly as possible?" He leaned closer and lowered his voice. "Do you want to think about the repercussions of having an unsolved murder in the Lazarian embassy? They'll have to call out the National Guard to protect this place, and all of us will still be trapped inside of it. And that includes you and your partner. The door is booby-trapped. Something sonic. Break the plane from this side and you'll drop like a rock. When you wake up, you'll have the worst headache of your life." He jerked his head at the group of humans. "Some of them tried it. Ask them if they'll try it again. Get it through your head, no one is going to leave here until this is settled, and if it takes months, that's not Thinta-ah's problem."

"All right," I said. All right for now. Call in a siege team? I'd never get that okayed. I'd have to see about locating the control for the doorway knock-out and figure out how to disable it later. That would probably cause an international incident-interstellar incident?-but not as major an incident as a siege team storming the place.

I looked at the Lazarian, but that face was unreadable. As usual. It was actually the outer surface of a kind of flexible exoskeleton that covered the whole head, featureless except for irregular, opaque black patches where the eyes and mouth would be. I'd read somewhere that the exoskeleton thickened and then thinned out again on some cycle that was individual to each Lazarian, but no one knew what caused it or what it meant to the Lazarians, except that they referred to what lay beneath it as the 'true face,' which was never to be shown to another living being, not even if its owner were dead. Which I thought begged the question: what was the point of having a so-called 'true face' if nobody could ever see it?

Something teased at the edge of my mind. I looked over at the Lazarians still motionless around the corpse. Was the penalty for seeing a 'true face' immediate death?

Everyone was staring at me expectantly. "I should still probably call in for authorization," I said weakly.

"Ca-ahll," said the Lazarian, and it wasn't granting me permission, but giving me an order.

I took the cellular off my belt and punched the speed-dial for the direct line to the captain. The subsequent conversation was almost as brief.

"She says it's a go," I said, clipping the phone back onto my belt. Stilton looked outraged for half a second and then wiped all expression from his face. For some reason, 'viewer operators get extremely possessive about their baby. Normally, Stilton wouldn't even let me hold his. "Let's get the program and convert the 'viewer for Lazarians."

Farber looked distressed as he swallowed. "Well, I've just thought of a problem."

I winced. "Only one. What a relief."

"It's big one. The program is in Ms. Entwater's office upstairs. Everyone who was in the embassy at the time of Ms. Entwater's death is now here in this room, Lazarians and humans alike. We may not leave this room, not any of us."

"Why not?" I said, looking at Thinta-ah.

"Bee-cauzzzzeh," the Lazarian replied, still using the command voice.

"Oh," I said, hoping I didn't sound sarcastic and looked at Farber. "Any ideas?"

He took a long time swallowing. "We could call a courier to fetch the program for us. Of course, the courier will have to stay here with us afterwards."

"We'll charge the overtime to the embassy," I said, reaching for my cellular again.

The courier business took a little longer, since the courier made the mistake of entering the room we were all in first, forcing me to have to call out for another. Forewarned, the second courier put the program chips in an envelope and tossed it to me through the open doorway.

"Go to it," I said, handing the envelope to Stilton. His face had a slightly greenish cast to it.

"Before I fool with the 'viewer and quite possibly break it, maybe we should talk to the humans," he said.

"Our species firrrrrrrst," said Thinta-ah, and it was another command. I wanted to object. Across the room, the half dozen human employees were also still huddled together, albeit less closely. Except for the Pilot, who had gotten tired of sitting and was now leaning against the wall behind the others, smoking a cigarette in a long holder. She looked happy, but all Pilots look happy all the time. It's something that happens to them as a result of their training. Maybe after that first trip, they never really 'came back,' so to speak.

"Do as you're told," Farber said to Stilton, managing to sound apologetic. "I've got a wife, a

husband, and three children I'd like to see again before I'm much older, and I imagine you both have families as well."

I cleared my throat. In Stilton's case, that had been the wrong appeal to make; his significant others had voted him out three weeks before and he was still stinging from it. But instead of giving Farber the evil eye, he went to work on the 'viewer, even allowing me to steady it for him while he changed chips.

It took Stilton about half an hour to get everything synchronized and in phase and whatever else-I'm no more of a techie than I am a diplomat, though I suspected the last fifteen minutes he spent on running tests and diagnostics was nothing but pure stalling.

"I guess it's ready," he said at last. "But even with all these adjustments and conversions for Lazarian biology, I don't know how well it's going to work with an exoskeleton."

"No ex-oh," said Thinta-ah, coming over to stand too close again. "True faaaa-aice."

The Lazarians gathered around Entwater made no perceptible physical movements, but something in the air changed. Everybody felt it, even the humans on the other side of the room. It was similar to the sudden presence of ozone before a lightning strike (don't ask me how I know about that unless you're ready for a story longer than this one), and for a moment, I thought I could actually feel my hair stand on end.

"I know your custom of not showing the true face," I said to Thinta-ah. "How-"

Thinta-ah made Stilton cringe by touching the 'viewer again. "Not a-ahlive."

"You'll allow a recording that we can look at?" Stilton said, amazed.

"A-ahllow to look a-aht recording one time," the Lazarian said, making a strange movement something like a full body shrug. The clothing, as loose, mismatched, and wrinkled as anything that ever came out of a Good Will free bin, seemed to readjust itself on the Lazarian's loose-jointed body, somehow acquiring even more wrinkles. Wrinkles especially seemed to be their fashion statement. The Lazarians around the corpse still didn't move, but I knew they were unhappy. Not just unhappy, but unhappier than they had ever been in their lives. I tried to imagine an equivalent for myself-being forced to strip naked in public seemed obvious, but I knew this was a lot more than a nudity taboo.

My gaze fell on the 'viewer. Maybe more like being exposed with one of these things? "One time," I said to Stilton. "We'd better make it a good look, then."

Thinta-ah did some fast organizing. The humans were to sit directly behind to the group in the center of the room so they couldn't possibly see their true faces while they were speaking to the 'viewer. Very simple solution-just the sort of thing that signals some major complication is imminent.

Stilton and I found a chair for the 'viewer. He got it aimed at the first Lazarian, fiddled with the focus for a few seconds, and then turned it on. "Any time," he told the Lazarian and turned away, crowding close to me as Thinta-ah crowded close to him.

In the long pause that followed, I could hear the Lazarian removing the exoskeleton. It was a ghastly sound, like cloth ripping and I wondered if it hurt. Anything that made a noise like that seemed like it had to hurt.

"You a-ahsk," said Thinta-ah.

I cleared my throat. "What is your name?"

"Simeer-ah," said the Lazarian. I felt Thinta-ah stiffen. The last syllable indicated this was some relative of Thinta- ah's, but not which kind.

"How are you connected to-"

"A-ahsk only about Entwa-ahter!" Thinta-ah practically shouted.

I hesitated, wanting to explain about establishing a pattern and knowing at the same time that Thinta-ah wasn't buying. A Lazarian's true face was exposed in the presence, if not the sight, of others, and to them, this was much more urgent than a murder. Any murder.

I could have sworn I heard Farber swallow from across the room. "Do as you're told," he called from where he stood facing the now closed door with the courier.

Behind me, the exposed Lazarian made a small noise. I'd never heard the sound before but I knew instinctively that the alien was weeping. A wave of compassion mixed with shame swept through me-not the best thing for a cop to feel during a murder investigation. If I'd felt sorry for everyone who ever cried during questioning, there'd have been a few more hardheads running free who had gotten away with murder and worse.

I took a deep breath. "What do you know about the death of Celie Entwater?"

"I a-ahm responsible."

My shamed compassion turned to cold water. "Are you saying you killed her?"

"It is my fault."

"Are you saying you killed her?" I asked again.

Stilton shrugged. "First time's a charm, I guess," he whispered.

"You strangled Celie Entwater?" I persisted.

"I ha-ahve the blaaaaaa-aimmeh."

"Stop now," said Thinta-ah, softly. "Next."

I gave up. "All right. We'll wait while you cover yourself."

Damnedest thing-the exoskeleton made the same ripping-cloth sound going back on as it had coming off. My nerves felt sandpapered. And I only had to hear that noise nineteen more times.

No, sixteen more times, I discovered after it was safe to turn around again. Stilton aimed the 'viewer at the next Lazarian. The first one looked no worse for the experience-outwardly, anyway. There was nothing like sweat or blood, the exoskeleton appeared unchanged. But the Lazarian's body looked a little more relaxed, the kind of posture you see in people who finally confess to a crime and find they're more relieved at being able to get it off their chests than they are frightened of being punished. Maybe the first time really had been a charm.

Then the second Lazarian said exactly the same thing and the world rearranged itself into the form it always took during a criminal investigation. The world is full of liars, liars who say they didn't do it and liars who say they did, liars who say they're sorry and liars who say they're not, liars who swear they've never done it before, liars who promise they'll never do it again. Apparently some things were universal-literally.

By the time the sixth one confessed, Stilton had taken over the questioning and my cynicism felt like a drug reaching toxic levels in my system. The only thing I actually listened to after number seven was that ripping-cloth sound. There was some kind of cosmic irony at work here, I thought; expose your true face and then tell a lie. Gave a deeper meaning to the term barefaced liar, that was for sure.

What I wasn't sure about was why it was affecting me so intensely. Maybe because I secretly suffered from the ailment of poor species self-image, believing that aliens must be truly superior forms of life to flaw-ridden humanity, and they'd shattered my illusions of their being closer to the angels. What was that old joke that had made the rounds back when the Lazarians had first arrived? An optimist thinks humans could be the highest form of life in the universe, a pessimist knows they are. Right. Try this one, I thought bitterly-an optimist thinks all beings are siblings, a pessimist knows they are. And the name of the first sibling, in any language anywhere, was Cain.

"Still awake?" Stilton asked me suddenly.

I managed not to jump at the sound of his voice. "Yeah. Just."

"Good. Last confession coming up," he said, fiddling with the 'viewer on the chair. Without my noticing, the lights in the room had come up in response to the waning daylight. Through the frosted windows, I could see that it was nearly dark. With any luck, we might get out by dawn, I thought wearily. And when we did, I was going to ask for a transfer out of homicide and go chase burglars for a while, or drug addicts or people who never paid their parking tickets.

"One more time," Stilton said, assuming the position.

The sound of ripping cloth. If this one was going to lie about Entwater, too, then I hoped it hurt.

But number seventeen was apparently the rebel in the group. "Fa-ahr-ber," the last Lazarian said.

"Fa-ahr-ber is at fault."

"What a relief," I said. "I was afraid sixteen Lazarians had taken turns choking someone to death. But it turns out that the man dressed like a butler did it. Can't wait to alert the media."

Thinta-ah suddenly came back to life and told Farber to send out for pizza. Apparently pizza was the closest thing we had to a Lazarian native dish. That didn't cheer me, or even give me an appetite, though I knew I should have been hungry.

And thirsty. The humans were-they all looked as if they'd spent the day in a desert, except for the Pilot, who seemed as completely detached and unaffected as ever. And yet, it was the Pilot who informed us that there were new problems developing with the humans.

She came over while we were setting up the 'viewer on a side table so we could go over the recordings. "We have people in very serious need," she said, pointing her cigarette holder at them.

"Of what?" As soon as the words were out of my mouth, I knew the answer, but the Pilot was already telling me.

"Of toilets. Some are in real pain," she added cheerfully. I wanted to hit her.

Instead, I talked to Farber. His response made me want to hit him. "Thinta-ah knows," he said.

"Arrangements were made before you got here." He pointed at a large ornamental flower-pot in the corner. "It only looks like a flower-pot," he added, as if reading my mind. "It's a, ah, Lazarian waste receptacle. The Lazarians are, ah-" swallow "-casual about this kind of function."

"Oh, really?" I said. "I sure haven't seen any of them use it."

Swallow. "They only need to every other week. This isn't the week."

I went to the humans and broke it to them myself. One of them, a middle-aged man, shook his head stubbornly without looking up at me. But a woman of about sixty shrugged, marched over to the receptacle and pointedly turned her back. The anger was almost palpable and I knew what kind of stories they were all going to tell when they were finally allowed to leave. Lazarian-human diplomatic relations could well end up being harmed more by the bathroom arrangements than by a murder, I thought, going back to Stilton. Even terrorists would take their hostages to the bathroom.

Or, I thought, looking at Thinta-ah who was being careful to look anywhere but toward the corner, had humans had just come that much closer to understanding the experience of exposing the true face?

Understanding? I doubted it. They'd remember it, but it wasn't the sort of thing that would generate much empathy.

"One look," Thinta-ah reminded us when we were ready to look at the recordings.

"Only one," Stilton said. He had half a pizza next to him and he was feeling better, much better than the delivery person who had come into the room before we could warn her. She sat sulking with the first courier. I wondered if anyone besides the employees' families, a courier service, and a pizza parlor had picked up on the fact that there was something funny happening at the Lazarian embassy. My cellular had been strangely silent, no one calling for an update or a statement or anything at all. Maybe we were sitting under a governmental belljar, families, courier service, pizza parlor, and all.

"I'll need to freeze each image sometimes," Stilton told Thinta-ah. "Is that all right?"

The answer was so long in coming that I thought Thinta-ah had gone to sleep standing up again.

"Yes. A-ahll right. One time through."

Stilton sighed with relief, turned on the 'viewer, and picked up a slice of double shitake mushroom. The screen lit up and he dropped the pizza in his lap. If I'd had an appetite, I'd have had pizza in my own lap.

The face on the screen was Enwater's.

Stilton slammed down the freeze button. "What did you do?" I whispered angrily. "Did you get the focus upside down and put it on her?"

"You can see I didn't," he said, too spooked to be offended. "That's not the image of a dead person. That face is animated, it's moving, talking. Look at the readings." He pointed at the box on the left side of the screen. "They say living, not dead."

I looked from the screen to Thinta-ah on the other side of the table. "Could this possibly be this Lazarian's true face?"

"I maaaaaa-aiy not look," Thinta-ah said. "But wha-aht faaaaa-aice you see must be the true one."

I got up and went around the table to the alien. "Listen," I whispered. "The face on that screen is--"

"Do not tell me," said Thinta-ah. "I maaaaaaaay not know. Wha-aht faaaaaaaa-aice is there is true."

I tried to think. It was hard with the heavy garlic smell drifting over from the platter next to Stilton. "Okay. The face on that screen cannot possibly belong to one of your species, but to another one entirely, and to a certain being--"

"I maaaaaay not know!" Thinta-ah's voice echoed in the room, not the command voice this time but a cry of anguish. Everything stopped. Over by the Rockwell-esque mural of the first meeting between human and Lazarian, Farber straightened up from a whispered conversation with the courier and pizza delivery person to glare at me.

"I'm sorry," I said to Thinta-ah and bowed. "I was...I was ignorant."

The Lazarian refused to look at me. I went back around the other side of the table and sat down next to Stilton, feeling as if I had just defiled somebody else's church with a rite from my own. And I didn't even go to church.

The association caught in my mind like a burr. Was this religious? Discounting hobby-killers and for-hires, people tend to take a life over matters having to do with love/sex and personal offenses, real or imagined. Our people...but the Lazarians?

I beckoned impatiently to Farber, who hurried over. "Can I ask Thinta-ah about Lazarian psychology?"

Swallow (of course). "No."

I groaned. "Why not?"

"You're not a psychologist. Besides, they don't actually have any."

"What are you talking about? They must. Everybody has psychology. Animals have psychology."

"Well, yes, they have it--" swallow "--but they don't have it as a science or a discipline or

whatever you want to call it. The study of psychology is unknown on their world."

"But they must have something."

Farber nodded. "They do. They have true faces."

"That's a big mother's help," I said. "You want to know what true face that Lazarian on the end over there has?"

He started to protest that he wasn't allowed to look and I waved his words away.

"Never mind. You wouldn't believe it if you did see it." He started to walk away and I caught his arm. "Hey, stay close, will you? I'm working without a net here."

"We all are," he murmured.

"The verdict is in," Stilton said, sitting back. "According to the 'viewer, this alien is telling the truth."

I stared at Entwater's image on the screen, still frozen. She had been a very attractive woman; at least one of her parents had had relatives from Japan and whatever else was mixed with it had blessed her with the kind of features that age well. Damned shame they wouldn't have a chance to age any further-or would they? Did true faces age? Supposedly, no one knew. Supposedly. But someone must have. There had to be some Lazarian keeper of forbidden knowledge...didn't there? I gave up that line of thought as futile. If there were any such Lazarians, they were most likely back on Lazarus, or La-ah-ZA-AHR-eesh, or whatever the hell it was.

"What do you want to do?" Stilton asked me. "You want me to let this picture go and see the next?"

"Are you done looking at it?"

"Are you?" He ran a hand through his black curls. "Remember, we're never going to see it again, so make sure you've seen your fill."

"I'm not so sure about that," I said as he unfroze the image. The corresponding readings in the box were holding, waiting for the video to catch up.

"What do you mean?" Stilton said.

I pointed at the 'viewer. "That's what I mean."

I could actually see Stilton break into a sweat as Entwater's face reappeared.

"Why are you surprised?" I said. "They all said the same thing." I looked at Farber. "All except one."

Farber gazed back at me, swallowing without comprehension. Apparently, the last Lazarian's voice hadn't carried over to him. Or he hadn't been paying attention.

This time we ran the video concurrent with the lie detector program; I watched the face while Stilton kept track of the readings. I wanted to imprint that face on my mind. It wasn't quite identical to the other one, but the differences were minor-the width of the face, the length of the nose, the size of the chin. That figured-each Lazarian's head would be a different size, so the face on it would be sized to fit. The Procrustean face. No, the true face on the Procrustean head.

Stilton sighed unhappily. "This one's telling the truth, too. Or so it says here. The program must be defective, though how we'd ever be able to tell-" he sighed again.

"Keep going," I said. "Maybe we'll see a variation somewhere."

Stilton gave me a dirty look. "Yah."

"We've already seen some." I leaned close and whispered. "That face isn't completely identical to the first one. There are variations, almost too minor to see, but they are there. What about the readings?"

He called back the first set for comparison. "You're right. But the variations are all physiological. They have two pulses, and they have respiration and skin temperature and they show the same degrees of variation from one Lazarian to another that we show one human to another. In all standard healthy people, anyway."

"So let's see if maybe someone isn't standard healthy."

Now he almost smiled. "I like you better than I used to, all of a sudden," he said and focused his attention on the 'viewer again.

But of course, I had just been overly optimistic. Entwater's face appeared, confessed, disappeared, and reappeared over and over without any telling variations. That was probably telling, except we couldn't understand what it was telling.

At least the seventeenth Lazarian looked like Farber. I took great consolation in the fact that my certainty had been correct. It didn't make up for the fact that the 'viewer said that Lazarian was also telling the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, but you can't have everything.

"The program's got to be defective," Stilton said, replacing Farber's facsimile with the seventeen readings. "We might as switch programs, record all the humans, and then get comfortable in our new home. We're going to be here quite a while and we might as well get over our potty shyness as soon as possible."

"No," I said, standing up and looking at Thinta-ah. Farber took a step toward me and Stilton rose to his feet in response, moving to protect my left.

"I understand your feelings about the toilet," he said, "but don't go losing your head over it now."

"I mean no, the program's not defective, not no, I won't use the toilet." I went over and stood as close as possible to the Lazarian, who didn't move away. "The program's incomplete. We don't have a control."

"A what?" said Farber suspiciously.

"A control," I said, staring up at Thinta-ah. "A standard to measure the other Lazarians against." Stilton practically jumped over the table.

"Same arrangements as for the other Lazarians," I said. "Thinta-ah, it's your turn in the barrel."

"It's already been Thinta-ah's turn," said Stilton, sounding scared.

The Lazarian lunged past me for the table, but Stilton already had the 'viewer in his arms. "Back off," he said, moving away, "or I'll turn this around and show everyone in the room what's on the screen."

Stretched out across the table, Thinta-ah hesitated and then straightened up slowly. "You maaaaaaaay not see."

"I've seen," Stilton said. "You didn't say every Lazarian but you."

"No. I did not." Thinta-ah backed away from the table but Stilton didn't budge. Instead, he beckoned me over and pulled the 'viewer away from his chest.

Thinta-ah had apparently been either the consummate diplomat or completely undecided. His true face was a grotesque mixture of Entwater's and Farber's. What made it grotesque was not that it had a patchwork aspect but that it was fluid-as if his features had been in the process of melting or flowing from one face to the other and somehow frozen in mid-change.

"I punched to create a control file and the 'viewer informed me that one already existed," Stilton said as I studied the screen. "So I called it up and olé."

"Voila," I corrected him.

"In this case, I'd say it rates an olé. But I should have realized it would be here. It was how Entwater created the program, by using Thinta-ah as a control. He must have been teacher's pet. Diplomat's pet. Whatever."

"Freeze it and let's hear the audio," I said. "Unfreeze it when the video and audio are in synch." A voice that had to be Entwater's came out of the small speaker. "What is your name?"

"Thinta-ah."

"Are you from another planet?"

"Yesss."

The image on the screen came to life. There were a few more questions. Favorite Earth food? Pizza with heavy garlic in the sauce-true. Last eaten yesterday? No-a lie. It was all very disjointed but light stuff, like a dating service application, slightly adapted. But it had served the purpose-the readings were clear. Stilton let it run out, and then put all the readings on the screen together, the seventeen and Thinta-ah's.

"God-damn-it," he said and blew out a disgusted breath. "Or maybe we should have known that, too-that if there was a control, then the program stands. They're all telling the truth, or they're the best liars in the universe."

"You're right."

We both jumped and Stilton almost dropped the 'viewer. The Pilot had managed to come right up to us without either one of us knowing. "Right about what?" said Stilton.

She pointed a finger at him, smiling. "You seek the truth. And you-" she swiveled toward me, finger still pointing "--seek the lie."

"What do you seek?" I said, making sure that Thinta-ah wasn't sneaking up on my side.

"Resonance, with all that is. Did you hear the one about the Pilot who went up to the hot-dog-omat and said, 'Make me one with everything?'"

"That joke is so old, it's got a long grey beard and a brand-new liver," Stilton said, eyes narrowing. "It's at least half a century since the first time someone told it, and it wasn't a Pilot-"

"It is now."

That wasn't a happy expression, I realized-it was a serene one. It was the kind of expression you saw on people who were sure they had all the answers, minus the vacancy of the hard-core cult convert. What was Resonance, anyway? Something about traveling point to point and finding alignment so that two points that seemed to be separated by a great distance actually weren't...or something. It didn't make any sense to me, but a Pilot was one more thing I wasn't. If I couldn't figure out how it worked, I sure couldn't figure out why it made her so peaceful.

"The Lazarians taught us Resonance," she said, nodding at me. "And to travel point to point in space, we must travel point to point in here, too." She pointed her finger at her own forehead now. "You don't have the correct alignments in here, so you cannot travel point to point, but point to off-point. Dead end. Wander forty years in the desert and not get out even then." She made us sit down again. while she perched on the edge of the table, placing the 'viewer next to her. "They are all telling the truth, and they are the best liars in the universe that you have ever met, because the truth they tell is their truth."

It was one of the few times in my life that I could say I had experienced satori. And once I saw it, I felt like a total fool for not seeing it to begin with. Most humans couldn't beat the 'viewer because no matter how much they believed in their own lies, they knew what they believed was at variance with facts that other people knew, and so both couldn't be true. But the Lazarians were aliens, so of course their concept of the truth would be alien as well.

Alien truth. True faces. The two concepts were whirling around each other in my head, trying to find a basis for connection.

"So what does that mean?" Stilton said. "Somehow they all killed her, or they're all lying to protect someone?"

The Pilot shook her head. "You don't understand yet. They taught us Resonance with all things. Because they Resonate, always."

I couldn't tell if this was another satori or a continuation. "Entwater liked them. She liked her work." I glanced at Farber. "And she, in turn, was very popular. So popular that-" I broke off, resting one hand casually on the 'viewer. "Tell me, was she popular because she liked them, or did she like them because she was popular?"

"That has Resonated into one thing now. It can no longer be determined because it is no longer distinguishable. All that remains is...love. Not the trendy brain chemicals," she added to Stilton. "Do you Resonate love?"

"You mean, understand it?" I laughed a little. "Does anyone?"

"What do you do? For love. What does it do to you?"

For once, I was at a loss because I'd never had a long term relationship or a child. Alone, you can travel faster in a career, but you leave a lot of understanding in the dust that way, too.

"Oh, I guess you care about the other person," I said finally, feeling like a sappy greeting card.

"Yeah. And when they stop loving, they stop caring," Stilton said gloomily. "Not responsible, all that shit."

The Pilot's face lit up even more. I hadn't thought it was possible. "Responsible. Responsible. Are you always responsible?"

I a-ahm responsible.

It is my fault.

I ha-ahve the blaaaaaaa-aimmeh.

Over and over again, sixteen times, from sixteen nearly identical true faces. I almost laughed out loud with the revelation. "They're guilty, all right," I said. "That is, they feel guilty, because they felt responsible for her and they didn't prevent her murder!"

All the Lazarians gathered around Entwater's corpse turned their heads to look at me. Except one; the last one, of course.

"Pin a rose on you," said the Pilot and patted my hand. "What next?"

"Trouble in Paradise," I said. "There's always trouble in Paradise, you can count on it, on any world. Because nobody can be that popular without someone getting jealous." I got up and walked toward Farber. "Someone got real, real jealous. Killing jealous."

"No," Farber said, enraged. "Jealous, yes, she had them all eating out of the palm of her hand practically, but I wouldn't-I couldn't-"

"And he didn't," said Stilton. "We haven't looked at the readings for his third recording, but I'd bet my life that they say he's as truthful as those from the other two recordings."

"I know that," I said, keeping my gaze on Farber. "He's not a good liar. Not that good, anyway. And he's not an alien. And he didn't have it quite right a minute ago-Entwater didn't have them all eating out of her hand, just almost all. You made a friend. One out of eighteen, not too popular, but a very, very devoted friend. A friend who loves you enough to be responsible for you. For your happiness. For your sadness. And for your anger and jealousy and hate."

Farber's mouth was hanging open. I turned toward Stilton. "Number seventeen's our murderer." I paused. "For a minute there, I was about to tell you to get out the cuffs, but then I remembered. Diplomatic immunity. We have to leave it up to Thinta-ah to administer any justice-poor Thinta-ah, the consummate diplomat of the Lazarian species, torn between both of them."

To my surprise, Thinta-ah didn't seem the least bit embarrassed. On a human, the body language would have screamed pride. Aliens; go figure.

Stilton looked from the Lazarians in the group to the Pilot and then to me. "Are you sure?" "Think about it," I said. "If they were all to blame for not preventing her death, who was really to blame for causing it? A Lazarian in love? Or the one the Lazarian was in love with?" I turned back to Farber.

"I didn't know," he said. "I had no idea." He frowned. "How did you?"

I opened my mouth and then realized I couldn't tell him. "The truth was staring me in the face all along," I said after a long moment. "I just had to recognize it for what it was."

Farber spread his hands helplessly. "I don't understand."

"I know. But one tip before we all get out of here." I pulled him closer by his lapel. "Quit this job. You're not suited for this kind of diplomacy. Really. I know this."

"I'm not a diplomat, I'm a secretary. I can get another secretarial job anywhere. But this was...exotic, exciting..."

"Give it up, Farber," I said, "or you're going to find that office politics have suddenly turned fatal on you."

That seemed to put the fear of God into him. I went back over to the table where Stilton and the Pilot were still sitting. "I'd say this means we're free to go."

"See for yourself," said the Pilot and gestured at the center of the room. The group of Lazarians around Entwater had broken formation and were moving slowly away from the corpse, clustering in smaller groups of twos and threes. Space density. As if they had to breathe each other's air or something.

"Everyone maaaaaaaaaay leave," said Thinta-ah, bowing to us. "The door is now in service."

"And the truth shall set you free," Stilton muttered, committing everything in the 'viewer to long-term storage formats and then shutting it down.

"Not bad," I said. "In an awful kind of way."

"That's what the truth is supposed to do," he said stubbornly, pulling out the 'viewer strap so he could hang it on his shoulder. "That's what it's for. Right?" he added to the Pilot.

The Pilot folded her hands briefly. "What is truth?" She went back to the group of humans, who were all just starting to get warily up from their chairs.

I stared after her.

"What?" said Stilton.

"True faces. Celie Entwater died for human sins. Jestng Pilot."

"What?"

"Nothing, nothing. Let's get out of here."

END
CADIGAN