

TRIAL BY ALIEN

by Ben Jeapes

Originally published in Odyssey, issue 3

Rachel was dead. Hugo was dead. Every human on board *Pathfinder* was dead except for him and he was under cabin arrest for no reason he could discern: the one human left alive while the ship drifted in space with the nearest help a thousand lightyears away.

Neil Cardoso was lying in his bunk while the wedge-shaped face of a Rustie loomed over him.

‘Do not move,’ Press Minor said. The voice coming from the translator unit around the alien’s neck was bland and expressionless. ‘You probably still need rest.’

‘Probably?’ Neil said.

‘Our species breathe the same mix of atmospheric components. It is likely we share the same reaction to smoke inhalation. One of us in your position would need rest.’

‘Look, I’m fine.’ But two hundred pounds of Rustie was pinning him down, a three-toed foreleg on either side of him, so there was nothing Neil could do while the two grasper tentacles either side of Press Minor’s mouth extended and depressed his tongue, pulled down his eyelids, felt his temperature. The flakes of brown-orange flesh that gave the species their nickname dangled in front of his eyes and its breath hissed gently through the ring of nostrils around the crown of its head.

‘You are probably well,’ said Press Minor. It swung itself back to stand on all fours next to his bunk and became a stumpy quadruped the size of a Shetland pony again.

‘Does that mean I can get out of this cabin?’ said Neil.

Press Minor paused.

‘Well?’ Neil said.

‘No.’

‘But why not? If I’m well-’

‘Every other human on board is dead-’ Press Minor said.

Neil thumped the wall. ‘I know!’ he shouted. ‘And I want to make my farewells. I want to make funeral arrangements. I want-’

‘-and we think you did it,’ Press Minor said, sounding almost apologetic.

* * *

They let him out the next morning and a troop of four Rusties escorted him, accompanied by Press Minor, to the ship's canteen. It was the largest open space on board and the survivors of the *Pride*, the fifty or so Rusties that were the other half of *Pathfinder's* crew, were there waiting.

'Mr Cardoso. Thank you for coming.' The speaker was Flesh Several, Senior and undisputed leader of the *Pride*. As it spoke the other Rusties immediately adopted the attitude of junior-to-senior.

'Flesh Several,' Neil said, 'I've been confined to my cabin, my friends are dead, I-

'All in good time, Mr Cardoso.' Flesh Several's voice had the perpetual translator unit-induced lack of interest about it. 'Our investigations have shown that the explosion was deliberately caused and you must admit that your sole survival from the human contingent raises interesting possibilities.'

'But I'm not a mass murderer!' Neil said. He looked at the Rustie at Flesh Several's side. 'Run Knowledge, tell him-'

'Can't, sorry.' Run Knowledge said. It sounded almost laid back: Neil half expected it to add a 'Man' or 'Dude' after it spoke. Run Knowledge had been Rachel's counterpart as ship's xenologist and one of the jobs they had been working on together was reprogramming the translators, making their wearers seem more individual and more colloquial to humans. Run Knowledge was using an altered unit now.

As ship's reporter, Neil had spent a lot of time with Run Knowledge: the Rustie had even read bits of the novels he tried to write and surely, Neil thought, had a fair idea of his character.

'Why not?' Neil said, baffled.

'Mr Cardoso, please understand,' Flesh Several said. 'We are in a difficult situation here. We are the first joint crew of our two species since our respective governments made their agreement to go into space together, so the situation is highly experimental and we have a responsibility to make it work.'

'There can be no doubt that a crime has been committed, whether by you or someone else we cannot yet tell. There is evidence, however circumstantial, which suggests you may have had something to do with the matter. It is important for everyone that this matter be cleared beyond all reasonable doubt. It is especially important bearing in mind that we may be here in space for a long time, until someone finds us. We need to know.'

Neil swallowed. 'I understand that.'

'However, our species and yours have very different systems of justice. If one of us errs then that one is dealt with by the *Pride*. That is not practicable in your case and I therefore propose to hold a trial in the manner by which your own government would try a human. I have witnessed such proceedings and I believe I have grasped the

concept. There will be a judge, and counsels for the prosecution and defence, and a jury. Mr Cardoso, do you agree?’

‘I think it’s an excellent idea,’ said Neil, with complete sincerity. He had finally begun to think ahead: he could already imagine returning home as the sole survivor of a human crew wiped out by sabotage, who just happened to have been somewhere else at the crucial moment, and not having any proof of his innocence.

‘Then we are agreed,’ Flesh Several said. ‘I will act as judge, Run Knowledge has agreed to act as the prosecuting counsel and you may select any one of us as your defence counsel if you so desire. A jury will be selected at random from among the crew. At 09:00 tomorrow morning the prosecution will present its case. For the duration of the trial you are confined to your cabin, having no contact with members of the crew save Press Minor, who will tend to any remaining medical requirements, and your counsel. Before we adjourn, do you have any questions?’

‘Um, yes,’ Neil said. If he was to have a trial as Flesh Several proposed, this must now be the arraignment, so: ‘if we’re going to have a human-style trial then you’ve got to tell me what I’m charged with, and take my plea.’

‘Of course. Run Knowledge?’

Run Knowledge spoke. ‘Neil Cardoso, you are charged with inadvertently causing the deaths of 28 members of this ship’s crew and deliberately plotting the death of one member, Hugo Jorden. How do you plead?’

‘What?’ Neil was on his feet. ‘That’s ridiculous!’ Hugo? Why would he want to kill Hugo? ‘You can’t be-’

‘How do you plead?’ Flesh Several said.

‘Not guilty!’

‘Thank you,’ said Flesh Several. ‘We are adjourned.’

* * *

‘What do you think?’ Neil said as Press Minor ran the scanner over him.

‘Yeah, I think you’re probably innocent,’ Press Minor said. He gazed at the instrument. ‘Course, I’m less sure about these readings-’

‘Oh, give me that.’ Neil snatched it out of Press Minor’s grasper and ran his gaze over the readings. Then he looked up at the Rustie. ‘Oh no, not you too!’

‘Hey, I got my translator reprogrammed to Rachel’s specifications,’ Press Minor said, sounding wounded. ‘Just about everyone has by now.’

‘You sound like a neo-hippy.’

‘S’my way of paying tribute to her work, you know? Anyway, what does the scanner say?’

‘Hmm? Oh, yeah.’ Neil looked at the display. He knew the basic Rustie medical and numeral glyphs, so-

‘My god, I’m burning up!’ he said.

‘Your temperature is optimal for your species,’ Press Minor said, and then Neil realised and deliberately rapped his own forehead.

‘Duh. Base 12. Yeah, in base 10 I’m fine.’

‘You know, Dr Xu was fond of a saying: ‘a doctor who prescribes for himself-’

‘Yeah, I’ve heard it. You can say the same for ...’ Neil trailed off, gazing thoughtfully at the cabin wall.

‘Yes?’ said Press Minor.

‘I’ve been thinking. Press Minor, I-’ Neil swallowed. ‘I didn’t cause that explosion. I didn’t.’

‘Yes?’ said Press Minor again.

‘But if there’s going to be a trial, and it’s going to be done properly, it’ll be Run Knowledge’s job to believe I did it, and he’ll use every ounce of his intellect and will power to convince the jury that I’m guilty.’ He grimaced. Interest in human fiction aside he had never really got on with Run Knowledge, though the Rustie and Rachel had been very friendly. ‘I think he thinks I did anyway.’

And Neil knew how it was with a Rustie Pride. Verbal communication played only a small part. Body language, pheromones, all manner of subtle emphases gave them a depth of understanding and communication that humans could only dream about. He had been planning to defend himself, in the pure and certain knowledge of his innocence, but faced with a Rustie playing to a gallery of Rusties- ‘I need one of you to be my counsel,’ he said. ‘Will you do that, Press Minor?’

‘You know I don’t anything about your legal system?’

‘Then I’ll tell you.’

Press Minor looked at the floor, then back at Neil. ‘Okay. What are my duties?’

Neil felt relief wash over him. ‘Well, first, you no longer think I’m probably innocent. You know it.’

‘You’ve got it.’

‘And your next step is to get every scrap of evidence that Run Knowledge intends to present against me.’

‘Does he have to tell me?’

‘Yes he does. It’s called disclosure.’

‘You know, that must save confusion.’

‘And third,’ said Neil, ‘you’ve got to know that people who keep saying ‘you know’ can be really, really annoying.’

* * *

The night before the trial began, Neil dreamed of Rachel. He turned over to face her, savouring the warmth of her body pressed against him, the feel of her hair on his face.

Hugo loomed over them. 'My God, Neil, if you knew where she's been-'

'Piss off,' Neil mumbled. 'It's only a dream and you're dead.' With a smile on his face he stretched out an arm to cover what turned out to be an empty stretch of mattress. Then he remembered, the memory pushing through the clouds of sleep, and he sobbed quietly into his pillow.

* * *

The trial was convened in the canteen. Neil, Press Minor and Run Knowledge sat facing Flesh Several. To their right, twelve Rusties sat on their haunches in two rows of six. Neil had been allowed to retrieve his aide, a portable artificial intelligence device that sat on the tabletop next to him and recorded the proceedings. The aides of the other humans on board had all been gathered together, a sad pile of anonymous electronics, along with their owners' personal effects.

Flesh Several addressed the jury, its words translated for Neil's benefit. 'I have explained the procedure. I must impress on you again the need for the utmost impartiality in this matter. Where Mr Cardoso comes from it is the custom that jurors and other court officials have no prior knowledge of the defendant or of the crimes for which he is charged, but that is not possible in this case. I therefore instruct you to put aside all prior knowledge, theories or preconceptions and to base your judgement solely on what transpires in this court.'

The amazing thing, Neil thought, was that was exactly what the Rusties would do. It was their way. Tell a human not to think of pink elephants and what was the first thing to come to mind? But if a Senior told a Rustie to forget something then it would, just like that.

'Run Knowledge,' Flesh Several said, 'it is now your duty to convince this court that Mr Cardoso is guilty. Proceed.'

'Thank you,' said Run Knowledge, rising to all fours. 'I'm going to show this court that Mr Cardoso, on the 14th of this month, acquired elements of thruster fuel-'

Run Knowledge went on, laying out the case that Neil had known he would. His disclosed evidence had been a vague jumble of facts with some witnesses thrown in for good measure. Every word was circumstantial, as Run Knowledge freely admitted, and Neil felt a warm glow in his heart. That, and the minor matter of a complete lack of motive-

'But why should he do this?' said Run Knowledge. 'What was his motive? Well, I'll explain that too-'

* * *

Rachel was waiting for him as he stepped down to the floor of *Pathfinder's* boat bay. He grinned and dropped his bags and pulled her into a long kiss. All the months of

hassle and hustling, all the favours given and called in to convince the authorities that *Pathfinder's* maiden survey voyage needed a reporter to cover it, and that he was that man ... it was all suddenly worth it. After a moment – far too short a time, suspiciously short – she gently pushed him away.

‘Neil,’ she said, ‘this is Run Knowledge. He’s my opposite number in xenology.’

‘Hello,’ said Neil, glancing down at the Rustie who stood patiently nearby.

‘A pleasure to meet you,’ said the Rustie xenologist. ‘You two are acquainted?’

‘Yeah, you could say that,’ Neil said. Now he could tell Rachel was keeping her distance and he wondered why.

‘Neil,’ she said, ‘you should know-’

‘Rach?’ Hugo Jordan’s tall figure had appeared in the hatchway. ‘Is that reporter here yet-’ He stopped dead when he saw Neil. Neil looked back in horror.

‘What’s he doing here?’ they said together.

* * *

Run Knowledge’s first witnesses presented no surprises: they were the engineers who had reconstructed the explosion and fire, and produced the forensic evidence that everyone already knew but had to pretend for the trial that they didn’t.

An explosion had wrecked the optical storage banks of *Pathfinder's* main computer. The data was held in backup but as the banks themselves had been destroyed there was nowhere for that backed-up data to go. It did not take a forensic genius to work out that the explosion had been caused by the detonation of a pack of thruster fuel from a spacesuit.

At this point the chief Rustie engineer was required by Flesh Several to explain how thrusters worked.

‘The fuel is made to be inert, see?’ it said. It too was using one of Rachel’s reprogrammed translators. ‘It basically just lies there until it’s needed. There’s a reactant that needs to be added to make it react at all, and even then it needs an electric charge from the triggering device. High voltage.’

‘And do all thrusters deliver the same thrust?’ Run Knowledge asked.

‘No, no. I mean, you don’t want suit thrusters to take off like a fusion booster, so the fuel there only has a small amount of reactant. The ship’s attitude thrusters need more kick so they have more reactant-’

‘Thank you,’ Run Knowledge said, ‘we get the picture.’ And it carried on with presenting the forensic results to the court.

The remains of the pack had been carefully patched back together by Rustie engineers, together with the triggering device. Which made it sabotage, because there no way either the fuel pack or the trigger could have been carefully placed against the optical banks by accident.

The initial explosion had been bad enough. The Rusties who had then opened the safety bulkhead hadn't known, or hadn't checked, that the compartment was still combustibly hot but deprived of oxygen – conditions ideal for backdraft. As the bulkhead opened a fireball swept out of it and into the next compartment, the human quarters, where the human contingent was sleeping. Safeties that should have gone into operation to prevent the spread of smoke and flame had been knocked out when the computer went down. By the time everything was under control, seven Rusties and 21 humans were dead.

The one human exception being Neil, ship's journalist and aspiring novelist, who was walking in hydroponics at the time, in the throes of insomnia as he worked out a further convoluted plot point.

Press Minor rose to cross examine each witness. 'But was there evidence of Mr Cardoso's involvement? DNA? Body hair? Finger prints?' This last was a concept that had to be explained to the jury but the answer in each case was 'no'.

The engineers added that they were still piecing together the wreckage: scraps of optical cabling from the remains of the storage banks, fragments of shattered instrumentation, bits of tubing. Debris had also been found down the air ducts that lead away from the computer room and towards the human quarters, somehow flung there by the blast. Run Knowledge asked the jury to note that point.

Run Knowledge thanked and dismissed the engineers, and announced: 'for my next witness I call Mr Cardoso.'

Neil and Press Minor had both known he would be called. Flesh Several spoke to him as he stood up.

'Mr Cardoso, it is my understanding that under your system, no one may be induced to testify against himself. Is this correct?'

'Um, yes, I think so,' Neil said.

'Then you do not have to answer Run Knowledge's questions if you do not so wish.'

'Oh, I wish, I wish,' Neil said with feeling. The sooner this nonsense was cleared up, the better.

He sat in the chair that had been provided as a witness stand. 'Um,' he said, 'isn't there an oath or something?'

It took another five minutes to resolve. A Rustie ordered by its Senior to tell the truth would do so but all parties conceded that the same could not be said of humans.

'The witness should swear on his sacred scriptures,' Run Knowledge said.

'Why?' said Neil.

'Well, because you believe that if you lie you'll suffer eternally in hell, don't you?'

'Actually, no,' said Neil, 'but if it pleases you-'

It pleased Flesh Several, so Neil used his aide to interface with the other aides on board and sure enough, one of them had the text of the Bible stored in its memory. He displayed the opening chapters of Genesis, held his hand over the display and swore to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth.

Run Knowledge was able finally to begin its examination and it fixed him with what was probably a beady Rustie look. 'So, Mr Cardoso, what was the nature of your relationship with the human Rachel Payne?'

* * *

'Any regrets?' Neil whispered in the dark. He felt Rachel turning towards him, felt her arms slide round him and pull him close.

'No,' she said.

They lay together silently.

'I'm sorry about-' he said after a while.

'Neil,' she said, with that note which told him to be quiet.

'When I saw-'

'Shut up.'

'Sorry.'

'Good.' A pause, then, 'I thought you were going to hit him again.' He could tell from her tone she was smiling.

Neil grinned. 'Me too.'

'If you went to such trouble to get on this ship just to see me, you really should have checked who else was on board.'

It had been the sheer shock of seeing Hugo standing there, though Hugo had been just as surprised – if he had thought of Neil at all it was still as a failed medic on Earth rather than the successful freelancer that Neil had become. Just as Neil always thought of Hugo, that moment at the party, frozen in time forever. The newly appointed Dr Rachel Payne, Institute of Xenology, calmly telling him that it was over, that she had made her decision – the shock alone had him teetering on the brink – and then the arm going around her waist, which he had watched with the same dread as if it had been a deadly snake. His eyes had followed the arm up to the shoulder, then to the face of its owner. A smugly smiling, equally newly appointed Dr Hugo Jorden.

And Neil had gone over the brink and his fist had smashed out. End result: Hugo pressed charges for assault, Neil was bound over to keep the peace.

At least Rachel stayed in touch. They saw each other occasionally and sometimes slept together for old time's sake – she and Hugo hadn't lasted. Why she consented, he never knew: loneliness, pity ... Each time Neil had hoped it would be the time: the time he finally broke through whatever barrier there was between her and the rest of the human race and she would accept him as her lifetime love. But it never was.

* * *

‘Will you explain to this court,’ said Run Knowledge, ‘the nature of human reproduction?’

Oh God, Neil thought. ‘The, um, mechanics are pretty similar to your own,’ he said.

He had seen Rustie matings – quickenings, they called them. They weren’t at all shy about it: an invitation to witness was a sign of friendship. Whenever the Pride wanted a new addition it decided who the lucky pair should be – any Rustie could play either role – and the whole lot of them clustered around to watch. The act, the sharing, the witnessing bound the whole Pride together in mutual love.

‘Yes, but your motivations are different, aren’t they?’ said Run Knowledge. ‘I mean, you don’t engage in reproduction simply to procreate?’

‘No, no, we don’t.’

‘Then why?’

‘I object!’ Press Minor said. ‘Mr Cardoso can’t possibly speak for the entire human race.’

‘No, but he can speak for himself and that’s the motivation we’re interested in,’ said Run Knowledge.

‘Please answer the question,’ Flesh Several said after a moment’s thought.

‘Why do we have sex?’ Neil said eventually. ‘Because ... because it’s fun. It’s pleasurable. And it ... it seals love. It seals a relationship. It’s as intimate as two people can get. It’s the best thing you can give the person you love.’

‘That’s the human way?’

‘Not necessarily.’ Neil looked Run Knowledge in the eye. ‘But it’s my way, and that’s what you want, isn’t it?’

‘I suppose. And this was your motivation for your activities with Rachel Payne?’

‘Yes,’ Neil whispered.

‘Was it her motivation?’

‘No. No, I don’t think so.’

‘And did she share your views on this matter?’

Neil couldn’t speak. He looked at his shoes.

‘I repeat the question,’ Run Knowledge said.

‘No, she didn’t.’ Neil looked up. ‘But she wouldn’t have done it if ... if she hadn’t been, I don’t know, fond of me.’

‘Fond?’ Run Knowledge said. ‘That’s not quite the same as love, is it?’

‘No.’

Press Minor interrupted again. 'Flesh Several, these questions aren't relevant to the matter and water leaking from the eyes is a sign of human distress.'

'Run Knowledge, do these questions have relevance?' Flesh Several said.

'They do,' Run Knowledge said. 'Mr Cardoso, I'm really sorry to cause you grief but it's unavoidable. Now, will you explain to the court the concept of a crime of passion?'

* * *

'It's not you,' Rachel said. She was sitting up in the bunk, hugging her knees. Neil lay next to her, looking up.

'Then what? Who?' he said. He braced himself for the hated name. 'Hugo?'

'Oh, for Christ's sake,' Rachel snapped. 'Look, I've said I want to be alone. Can't you just take that at face value without dragging in third parties? You or Hugo. Him or me. Black or white. Don't flatter yourself! Don't be so ... so *binary*.'

It was the first time Neil had heard the word *binary* used abusively.

'Yes, I've slept with Hugo,' she said. 'Several times, and if you like I'll describe each and every occasion with time, place and duration, since you enjoy torturing yourself so much. But not lately. In fact, not for years.'

Years? 'But I thought-'

She swung round to face him. 'What?'

'Nothing,' he mumbled.

'No, go on.' Her glare verged on hatred.

'I thought ... you and him ... together all that time ...'

'You thought because we did research together we were lovers, didn't you? You thought that all those co-authored papers meant we must be doing it on the side? Neil, you're pathetic. You can't stand the man and I once, once dumped you for him, so we're lovers. I can't believe it! What does ... I mean, what does that say about me? About how you see me? I'm incapable of keeping my clothes on for a decently good looking man? I can't handle my own life? I can't make my own choices? You ... you're ...oh!'

She made a cutting gesture which did more to express her contempt than any words. Neil lay in silence, not daring to move. He felt like a stranger in his own bunk.

When Rachel spoke again he jumped.

'Hugo, for your information, is a professional who can detach his brain from his balls and concentrate on the job. We've worked together because ... well, we're a team, him and me and Run Knowledge. We can bring our different perspectives to the job and we're finding out so much. So much! About the species we discover, about each other. Reprogramming the translators is just the start of it. We understand the Rusties

like never before and they ... well, Run Knowledge could almost be human, some of the things he says and does. We're getting so much from each other ... wework. We're a team that works, and we're not going to split up because you've got the emotional maturity of a thirteen-year-old with his first crush. Now go to sleep.'

* * *

'So, like you're saying, humans can be driven to murder through jealousy of a loved one?' Run Knowledge said.

'Yes,' said Neil. 'I've never met any myself but yes, I believe so.' And then it struck him and he gazed into the distance. *Humans can be driven to murder through jealousy of a loved one...*

Hugo. Hugo had been the jealous one. Just because Rachel wasn't sleeping with him didn't mean Hugo didn't want her. Neil could empathise with that. Hugo ... but even though Neil couldn't stand the man, could he accuse him of murder?

Yes, he could. Okay. Hugo tried to kill Rachel ... or maybe, tried to kill Neil? But why cause the explosion? Because something went badly wrong. So what was he trying to do that had gone wrong ...

'Mr Cardoso?' Run Knowledge said loudly. Neil jumped. 'I repeat: it's something outside your experience?'

'Um, yes.' Neil brought his thoughts back to the present.

'Thank you.' Run Knowledge turned to Flesh Several. 'Now, I'd like to submit as evidence the personal aide of Mr Cardoso.'

'I object!' said Press Minor. 'Surely, using Mr Cardoso's aide will be tantamount to his giving evidence against himself?'

Flesh Several considered the matter. 'Mr Cardoso should give his consent and no inference may be drawn if he does not. Mr Cardoso, may Run Knowledge submit your aide as evidence?'

Neil shrugged. Run Knowledge had said he would do this and there wasn't a thing there that could incriminate him.

'Sure,' he said.

* * *

It was a quiet spell and Neil had time to himself. He looked at the words floating on his aide's display and for the first time in far too long they had nothing to do with the reports he would be submitting when they got back home.

'I cannot marry you, Peter,' she whispered.

He stared at her through a howling whirlwind of confusion. 'But why not?' he stammered. 'I thought we agreed-'

'Selena?' They both turned towards the new figure to enter the ship's lounge. Metal-shod boots rang out on the deckplates. The figure that came into the

light strutted arrogantly, one hand on its hip and the other held out to claim her. The brow was high and noble, the moustache immaculate, the expression of unutterable arrogance.

'The launch is ready,' declared the man. He condescended to notice Peter and inclined his head slightly.

'Good day, De Montfort,' he sneered. Selena's hands flew to her mouth.

'X!' she exclaimed.

Neil scowled at the last line. X. X? X! X had to be a name that said everything. X was a despoiler of virgins, a cad, a bounder, an arch-seducer who-

'Hi,' said an unenthusiastic voice. Neil looked up: Hugo was in the doorway.

Professional, he thought. *Brains from balls*. 'Can I help you?' he said.

'Yeah.' Hugo held out a data crystal. 'Thought you might like this. That last but one planet? Evidence of some weird symbiotic relationships among the lower life forms. Thought it might make good copy, that's all. I wrote it down to your level.'

Neil took the crystal. 'Thanks-' Hugo was looking at his aide's display and he quickly blanked it.

Hugo grinned and the old smugness was back. 'Still writing that stuff, are you?'

'Yes.'

'Anything published yet?'

'No,' Neil said. Hugo's silence was eloquent. 'It's a hobby. Just a hobby.'

'Right.' Hugo turned away. 'See you.'

He left and Neil called up the novel again. 'For character X,' he dictated to the aide, 'universal rename Hugo'.

* * *

'And so the plot of this novel is that whilst on this cruise Peter De Montfort kills the Duke Hugo for love of the Lady Selena?' said Run Knowledge.

'Yes,' said Neil. *Come on, Press Minor, do your job -*

'This is absurd,' said Press Minor, right on time. 'Mr Cardoso writes fiction as a hobby. The operative word is *fiction*.'

'Sure, it's fiction,' said Run Knowledge. 'Mr Cardoso, did you invent this genre of fiction?'

'No, it's centuries old.'

'Centuries old? So humans have been practising this way of life for centuries?'

'No! I mean, look, not all humans go about murdering for love-'

'Not all? You mean, some do?'

‘So what?’ Neil said. ‘So what? ‘Some’ can be any number, any tiny, infinitesimal little fraction-’

‘But surely your plot would be recognised by any human, no? You wouldn’t have written this story if you hadn’t expected your readers to understand it.’

‘I suppose-’

‘Then surely any human would potentially be capable of committing a crime like this! Now, Mr Cardoso, I don’t suggest that all humans are latent murderers: I mean, you say yourself that in your novel, Peter De Montfort isn’t thinking clearly when he commits his crime. He isn’t his normal self. When you came on board *Pathfinder* you were your normal self and, sure, murder was the furthest thing from your mind but were you thinking clearly, were you your normal self when you plotted to kill Hugo Jorden?’

‘I did not plot to kill him!’ Neil shouted.

‘Okay,’ said Run Knowledge. ‘For the information of this court, will you describe how in your novel the murder is carried out?’

* * *

A tube led from the exhaust manifold of the sleeping ship’s thousand horsepower engines. It led into the air conditioning ducts.

Peter had already climbed through them, carefully blocking off the junctions. Now the only open passage was to Hugo’s cabin – a cabin where even now the sleeping Duke’s lungs were drawing in the carbon monoxide being pumped there from the engines. Quick, quiet and unfortunately painless.

Another couple of minutes, Peter pondered. Then he would disconnect the tube, go up into the ducts again and remove the blocks he had put in to prevent the deadly fumes from spreading throughout the system and killing the wrong people, and retire to bed, perchance to dream-

* * *

‘And you don’t see the similarity?’ Run Knowledge said.

‘No, frankly.’

‘Then I’ll explain it to you. The explosion was caused by the discharge of a triggering device into a pack of thruster fuel, check?’

‘Um, yes, apparently.’

‘And we learnt earlier that thruster fuel reacts to this charge according to the amount of reactant in it. A large amount will deliver enough punch to manoeuvre a ship?’

‘So I gather,’ said Neil. ‘I’m not an expert.’

‘Of course, and that was your downfall. What would be the effect if only a small amount of reactant was added?’

Neil shrugged. 'I don't know much about the chemistry. I suppose it depends on how much smaller. I mean, it could have any range of effects, from detonating the whole lot of fuel, through making it bubble a lot, to making it break down gently.'

'And if it broke down gently, what would be the effect?'

'Well, it would split. It would give off-' Neil's widened in horror. 'Oh, shit.'

And Run Knowledge filled in the missing pieces of the prosecution's case. The computer room was the last room in its compartment: the next compartment held the human quarters. A line of individual cabins along one corridor, the first of which was Hugo's, with a shared air duct that ran along them all.

Neil had gone into the computer room because the air duct linked directly to Hugo's cabin. The tubing that the engineers had found had led from the fuel pack to the duct. The trigger should have caused the fuel to bubble gently, releasing fumes which would have been picked up by the tube and carried to Hugo's room.

But for some reason – perhaps nerves, perhaps because he was hurrying – Neil had added too much reactant to the fuel. The result: instead of bubbling, explosion; the deaths of Hugo Jorden, Rachel Payne, the other humans and seven Rusties; and the crippling of the ship.

* * *

'This case is ludicrous,' Neil said in his cabin. 'Any jury of humans would see it's just too coincidental, my novel and the facts – the alleged facts of this case. They wouldn't be taken in for a second.'

'Shame it isn't a jury of humans,' said Press Minor.

'Yeah.' Neil sat with his chin on one hand, until he realised he looked like Rodin's Thinker and sat up. 'Hypothesis,' he said. 'Hugo wanted to kill either Rachel or me. He set up everything as Run Knowledge says I did. The tube didn't lead to Hugo's cabin, it led to mine. Or Rachel's. I mean, after the explosion some of it was just lying on the floor and some of it was flung down the duct, so it could have led anywhere. You see? It's every bit as circumstantial as Run Knowledge's forensic evidence.'

'And the fact that the attempted murder matches the fictitious one so closely?' said Press Minor.

'I'm working on it. I'm working on it,' Neil said gloomily.

'Remember, we don't have to prove anything,' Press Minor said, 'we just have to cast reasonable doubt on the prosecution's story. How many others have read your novel?'

'No one. But I've discussed it with some of the others-'

'You see?' Press Minor said. 'Reasonable doubt! All we need to do is show that the gist of your plot could have reached other people on this ship.'

'You're the counsel,' Neil said. 'You do the arguing.'

'I'll do that. I'm also going to go through as many personal records and notes as I can to see who else might have had the motive. And so are you.'

'I just want to go to sleep,' Neil muttered.

'I'm trying to defend you,' Press Minor said. 'Kindly help me. Your aide can do the linking up. I'll start with Hugo, you start with Rachel and we'll take it from there.'

Ten minutes later, Neil had to explain to Press Minor what 'bingo' meant.

* * *

Neil took the stand the next day.

'I was looking through Rachel's personal notes,' he said. 'I wanted to show that others might have had the motives that Run Knowledge ascribes to me. And I found this.'

'We wish,' said Press Minor, 'to submit the last log entry of Rachel Payne.'

'I object!' said Run Knowledge. 'That information was protected on Rachel Payne's aide and I was unable to gain access to it. How has the witness managed?'

'I lived with her for God knows how long,' Neil said. 'Of course I could get into it.'

'And we will be glad to make this information available to the prosecution,' Press Minor added. 'May we proceed with our submission?'

'Please do,' said Flesh Several.

The lights dimmed and Neil set Rachel's aide to public playback. Her image appeared in front of the witness stand.

'Please note the time and date,' said Press Minor. 'Fifteen minutes before the explosion.'

Rachel began to speak. 'Whoa! Major balls-up. I just realised the latest translator update program has a minor glitch. Okay, a major glitch. This is embarrassing. Numbers are being translated literally, without taking into account the fact that humans think in base 10 and Rusties in base 12. If I say, oh, I don't know, 'twenty two' to a Rustie then the translator won't translate it into base 12 for the Rustie's benefit, though the Rustie will think it does. Result: the Rustie will think it hears a higher number. On a scientific expedition, this could be awkward.'

'Fortunately no one's going to fly the ship into a star or anything because the nav systems are completely separate. Still, I've corrected the error and the central computer has just delivered an update to all the translators. First thing tomorrow I'll put out an announcement that any calculations made involving a translator in the last 12 hours or so are wrong-' Neil paused the transmission and the lights came up again. He blinked, hoping the tears wouldn't show. Seeing her again, hearing her voice-

'Flesh Several, the prosecution would ask the defence its point,' said Run Knowledge.

‘The translators were not translating between base 10 and base 12 figures,’ said Press Minor. ‘The prosecution says that the explosion was caused by too much reactant being added to the thruster fuel. The thruster pack in question came from a human style spacesuit. Now, if whoever set the bomb wasn’t a skilled space mechanic then that individual would have received verbal instructions from the suit’s computer. Because it was a human suit, the instructions would have been given in Standard. The computer would have given the desired quantity of reactant in base 10, but if one of us thought the figure was base 12, it would have put in a higher amount.’

For the first time Flesh Several had to call for order in the court as the Rusties broke into a babble amongst themselves. The strong, sweet smell of Rustie got stronger, which was always a sign of powerful feeling. Press Minor had got through to them.

Press Minor rounded off its submission. ‘We don’t contest the forensic evidence presented by Run Knowledge, just its interpretation. Mr Cardoso wouldn’t have made the errors that were committed by the perpetrator of this crime: no human would. We ask this court to dismiss the charges against Mr Cardoso and to concentrate its efforts on finding the member of our Pride who is so aberrant in its behaviour as to do what has been done and to have concealed it from us. That ends my submission.’

Neil sat back with a happy sigh. Surely, surely. And a smart move from Press Minor, ending on that note. It was a Rustie whodunnit, it would be dealt with in the Rustie way, he was exonerated and he would no longer be required to explain the finer points of heterosexual love and passion to a group of extraterrestrial hermaphrodites-

‘Run Knowledge,’ said Flesh Several, ‘how do you respond to this submission?’

‘Like Press Minor,’ said Run Knowledge, ‘we agree on the details but differ on the interpretation.’ *Oh, what is your problem?* Neil groaned silently. ‘If the translators can get that fact wrong, what else can they be misinterpreting? What might Mr Cardoso have said that we’ve misheard? We ask that a mistrial be declared, a full diagnostic run of the reprogrammed translators and a new trial opened as soon as is convenient, to be conducted using only translators with their original programming.’

‘And how will this diagnostic be run?’ Press Minor demanded. ‘There’s only one person on board who can speak Standard naturally. Will you have the translators go through every word in their vocabulary with him?’

‘Enough,’ said Flesh Several, rising to its feet. ‘You have both made valid points which I must take into consideration. We adjourn until 09:00 tomorrow when I will give my decision.’

* * *

‘Don’t take it personally,’ said Rachel, ‘but I’m giving up men.’

‘Oh,’ said Neil.

She smiled and kissed him lightly on the cheek. ‘Well, not just men. People. I’ve decided I’m just not cut out for romantic love. I’m not one for short term

relationships and the thought of waking up next to the same person for the rest of my life is terrifying, and there's no comfortable middle ground that I've been able to find, though God knows I've tried.'

'So ... what are you going to do?' Neil said.

'I'm going to be a Rustie.'

'What?'

'Oh, not really.' She waved a hand. 'I've got several million years of evolution telling me I'm human and I'm not going to fight them. But their philosophy, the oneness of the Pride, that's what appeals to me, and to do that I'm going to have to become as much like them as I can.'

'But ...' Neil said. 'But ... I mean, Rach, you're a loner. You've never been happy with other people crowding in. How'll you manage in a Pride, for Christ's sake?'

'You're right. I've never been happy with other people crowding in,' Rachel said, with an emphasis on people, 'because people never know when to lay off. But Rusties do, Neil. There's that constant undercurrent of communication and you can tune in or tune out at will. I've found this, like very faint glimmerings, on this ship, and now I want to study and learn and, who knows, maybe I'll find things out that will help both our races understand each other more.' She grinned. 'I've got insights already, I've learned things on this voyage that'll blow your socks off. I can't wait to get back home and publish. This'll be my monument, Neil.'

'Right.' Neil looked down at the floor and let her words sink in. She'd made her decision and if he was going to respect it, and her, he should feel good. He wanted to feel good about it, he really did.

But he didn't. 'Right,' he said again.

'Oh, Neil.' She sounded annoyed but still she leaned forward and hugged him. 'If it's any help, if I was going to stay with men, it'd be someone like you.' He didn't answer and they stood with their arms round each other for a long time.

The door opened. 'I don't believe it. Just can't get enough, can you Rachel?' Hugo stood there, amazement on his face. 'My God, Neil, if you knew where she's been-'

'Piss off, Jorden,' Rachel mumbled into Neil's shoulder.

'Piss off. Fine. Fine. Piss off. Sure. Okay.' Hugo turned to go, then glanced back. 'Enjoy it while you can, Neil. That woman's going to ruin us all.'

Neil spared one finger to deliver a non-verbal response and Hugo slammed the door as he left.

* * *

If you knew where she's been -

-ruin us all -

Neil's eyes opened and he stared through the darkness at the ceiling, trying to catch the fleeing fragments of what his subconscious had just told him. He sat up.

'Lights on. Aide on,' he said.

The lights came up and his aide spoke from his bunkside table. 'Awaiting input.'

'Interface with the aide of Rachel Payne again. Access all the xenology related files you can.' *Insights...* If what he was after in Rachel's files was coded then he was stuck but-

Three hours later Press Minor found him sitting at the table, head resting in his arms, fast asleep with his aide on stand-by on the tabletop in front of him.

'I've got it, Press Minor,' he said when the Rustie woke him. 'I know what happened.'

'Good. Now dress,' Press Minor said. 'Flesh Several delivers his decision in 10 minutes.'

* * *

'Press Minor,' Flesh Several said to the court, 'has made a good case for its contention that one of us caused the explosion that crippled this ship and killed 28 of its crew. The fact that, for a short while, the reprogrammed translators mistranslated any figure that they heard cannot be disputed.'

'However, what has not been proved is that the murderer intended anything less. For all we know the bomber, who might have been Mr Cardoso or another human, had noticed the flaw in the translators and had planned to make it appear as if one of us caused the explosion.'

'Run Knowledge has made the point that if the translators are wrong on this, what other errors might they have made? However, an inconsistency like this would have come out before long anyway, and I feel that other inconsistencies would have also have emerged by now.'

'This trial will therefore proceed along its original grounds, and I have already directed that all members of the crew are to use old-style translators until further notice. The defence will now present its case.'

'Flesh Several,' said Press Minor, rising to his feet, 'I must announce that Mr Cardoso has seen fit to dismiss me as his representative and asks leave to represent himself.'

'That is a strange move, Mr Cardoso,' said Flesh Several. 'You originally chose to have Press Minor represent you because you did not feel you could hold your own in a debate with our species. Has that changed?'

'What I have to say will speak for itself,' Neil said.

'Very well.' Flesh Several gave the head wiggle that was a Rustie shrug. 'It is noted that you now defend yourself and we ask you to present your first witness.'

‘May I approach the bench?’ Neil said.

‘There is no need. I can hear you perfectly well from there.’

‘I meant, can I have a word in private, with you and Run Knowledge?’

‘Very well. Approach.’

Neil and Run Knowledge converged on Flesh Several.

‘I only have one witness I want to call,’ Neil said quietly, ‘and that’s Run Knowledge.’

‘Quite ridiculous!’ Run Knowledge declared.

‘Certainly unusual,’ Flesh Several said. ‘Mr Cardoso, this was not in your original submission of evidence and even by human standards, a request to cross examine the prosecuting counsel is surely unorthodox.’

‘It is,’ said Neil. ‘I’ll ask only three questions, and if it’s agreeable to the court, Run Knowledge can still function as the prosecuting counsel while it answers. I mean, it can raise all the normal objections and so on. Its answers can be simple yeses or nos.’

‘Agreed,’ said Flesh Several, after a moment’s thought.

‘Flesh Several, I still object-’ said Run Knowledge.

‘Nonetheless,’ said Flesh Several. ‘Run Knowledge, you will take the witness stand now. Mr Cardoso, this is on the condition that you ask your three questions and no more.’

‘Understood,’ said Neil. He went back to his desk while Run Knowledge took the stand and was instructed by Flesh Several to speak only the truth.

‘My evidence,’ said Neil, ‘comes from the aide of the late Rachel Payne. It will be relayed through my aide and displayed for the benefit of the court.’ He set the aide to display one of the images he had found in her files at full magnification in the centre of the room. It was a frozen image of a Rustie: and more than that, it was of a Rustie at full sexual arousal. The flap of skin between its front legs was drawn back to reveal its male and female genitalia, side by side.

‘My first question,’ said Neil. ‘Is that you, Run Knowledge? Remember, yes or no.’

‘Yes,’ said Run Knowledge. ‘In my capacity as counsel, I must point out that I have taken part in quickenings that have been witnessed by humans. It is not surprising that an image of one should be on a human’s aide.’

‘Then I’ll ask my second question,’ said Neil. He took a breath – he knew what was coming but it was still painful – and the image expanded to show the other partner in the coupling, also frozen and poised for action. He pressed the play button and uproar broke out as the scene commenced. For once Flesh Several had to call for order more than once. Neil waited until the noise had died down, then: ‘are you engaged in sexual congress with Rachel Payne?’

Run Knowledge was silent for so long that Neil almost repeated the question. Then: 'I decline to answer.'

'Well, like I said, it speaks for itself,' said Neil. He shut the image off: it was too distracting, too painful. 'My third question, Run Knowledge. When I first saw this, I couldn't believe it. I was shocked. My mind just couldn't take it in. It disgusted me. It's perversion. Any human would think so-' [Apart, he thought, from the various sects and cults that had wanted to have sex with the Rusties five minutes after first contact, but he didn't mention them to save confusion] '-and I think most of your species would call it perversion too. Am I right?'

Run Knowledge said nothing.

'You are directed to answer the question,' Flesh Several said, over the noise of the crowd. Still Run Knowledge said nothing and Neil knew that the Rustie had just become as alien to the rest of its Pride as a human.

'Flesh Several', said Neil, having to raise his voice, 'the defence wishes to make another submission-'

* * *

'Run Knowledge confessed everything,' said Press Minor. They were in the canteen, which had reverted to its normal function. Flesh Several had accepted Neil's submission that there was sufficient evidence to cast reasonable doubt on the prosecution's case and the matter had become subject to Rustie custom. With the entire Pride around it, willing it to confess all, Run Knowledge wouldn't have had a chance, even though it had previously put itself so far outside the Pride that it could disobey a direct order from its Senior. 'It was engaged in sexual activity with her, and with Hugo Jordan, at first in the interests of science and discovery but later simply for enjoyment.'

If you knew where she's been- Neil thought. 'I know the rest,' he said. This was what had come to him out of his subconscious that morning. 'Rachel was going to publish, which would ruin their careers, so they conspired to do her in, and the plan backfired.'

'No,' Press Minor said. Neil put his drink down and stared at the Rustie.

'Then what?' he said.

'At first Hugo Jordan was averse to her publishing but Rachel had talked him into accepting it. They and Run Knowledge would co-author the paper.'

'Then what-' Neil said again.

'The process worked both ways,' Press Minor said. 'She was becoming like us but Run Knowledge was becoming like you. Run Knowledge was jealous of Hugo and wanted him dead. It was inspired by your novel.'

'The bastard,' Neil whispered. 'The bastard.' Part of his mind noted that he was only now feeling sorry for the late Hugo, on whom he had earlier been quite ready to try and pin the crime. 'But Rachel wasn't sleeping with Hugo. She told me.'

‘Sleep was not part of their activity,’ Press Minor agreed.

‘That wasn’t what I meant.’

‘Of course. No, they were not intimate, but they had been and Run Knowledge feared they might be again. Be grateful: if it had succeeded with the first murder, it would have come for you next.’

‘So, what happens now?’ Neil said after a moment.

The head wiggle shrug. ‘The Pride will try to reintegrate Run Knowledge,’ Press Minor said. ‘If the psychological and neurological damage of its perversion runs too deep for healing, it will be put to death. My hopes are not high. It could ignore a command from Flesh Several and it had been able to hide its crime from us.’

‘Oh.’ Neil winced but had to admit he felt very little pity. ‘That’s not what Rachel would have wanted. She loved life, life in all its forms.’

‘If she wanted to be like us then she would accept our ways.’

‘Yeah, yeah, but she told me her work would help us understand each other better, get along more ... it’s just a pity that- what’s that?’

Several Rusties had run into the canteen, gasping together in their own language. Press Minor spoke to one of them, then turned quickly to Neil. ‘It is Explorer, just showed up on radar. They have responded to our hails. We are rescued.’

Neil shut his eyes. ‘Thank God.’

‘*Explorer* will want a full report of the human aspects of this mission,’ said Press Minor. ‘Will you-’

‘You bet,’ said Neil. He put the glass down firmly and stood up. ‘Every last byte.’ Rachel had wanted a monument – he would build it.

A monument ... for a moment he had a brief mental image of a statue of Rachel on the job with a Rustie, but he pushed the thought away.