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"Nice of you to show up, Jack," Ian said as I hustled up to the neatly-dug rectangle and the pile of dark earth beside it.

"I had to secure the helicopter." To place the open grave between myself and

Ian, I walked over and stood beside Jean. He offered me a faint smile.

"Shall we begin?" asked Gianni. He stood at the head of the grave; traces of

dirt clung to the ankles and wrists of his coveralls.

I nodded. Jean pursed his lips. Ian glared at me, then gave a sharp nod.

Gianni consulted the computer slate in his hands. "I've had to adapt the ceremony somewhat," he said. "Our relationship with John was unique, and I'm

not sure that any single term can do it justice, but I've decided on 'beloved.'" He cleared his throat, then began reading from the slate. "We

are

gathered today in mourning and remembrance...."

The wind gusted, ruffling my hair, tugging at the seams of my coveralls, scattering dirt from the edge of the grave. As Gianni's calm, measured voice

continued, I looked out past the grave to the cluster of domes some two hundred meters away that marked the station. Beyond it lay the forest, blue-green in the silvery sunlight, extending out toward the horizon where distant hills rose to meet the purple sky. Beside me, Jean coughed.

"...this strange and unfamiliar world, whose ways he came to learn," Gianni was saying.

Looking across the grave, I met Ian's gaze. He glared at me, hot-eyed, his face a taut mask. I locked eyes with him, matching his anger, daring him to break contact first.

Our silent contest was ended by the sharp rap of Gianni's knuckles against his

slate. He knelt down and gathered a handful of earth, scattering it into the

grave as he intoned "Ashes to ashes, and dust to dust. May he rest in peace—John, our father and brother."

To a chorus of "Amen" Ian, Jean, and I added our own offerings of dirt. I went

last, pausing to glance at the colorless face in the grave, a face repeated identically in those of the three men around me, and in my own.

"Goodbye, John," I said.

Four shovels lay beside the pile of earth, and in unspoken accord we each took

one. We worked in silence, each turning a spadeful of earth into the grave in

a regular, unconscious rhythm. Like fingers on a hand, I thought. Only now one

of those fingers had been deliberately chopped off. The corpse beneath us, its

skull caved in from a vicious blow, bore witness to that.

Ian thrust his spade into the pile of earth and left it there, breaking the rhythm. "All right, Jack," he said. "Why did you do it?"

"Me?" I said.

"You'd been arguing with John for days," he said.

"That's because he was being too cautious with letting me scout in the 'copter." I turned to Gianni, who stood with the point of his spade in the ground, his chin resting on the end of the handle, cushioned by the backs of

his fingers. "You know how much of an old woman John could be about safety."

"He was cautious," Gianni agreed. "But with reason. Storms can blow up over the hills faster than the weather satellites can track them."

"I can dodge storms in the 'copter," I said.

"Whether you could or couldn't, you'd certainly feel compelled to try,"

Gianni

said dryly. "You take too many chances, Jack."

"I can't help it. It's how I was made."

Ian pounced. "Exactly. You're the thrill-seeker, Jack, the dare-devil. You told John that if he didn't get out of your way, you'd—"

"Make him. Yes, I know." My hands tightened on the spade. "We were arguing.

I

said something foolish. That doesn't mean I killed him."

"It makes you the best suspect," he retorted.

"Oh, really? What about you? I seem to recall that you were conveniently absent when Jean found the body."

"I came as soon as I could. I was—"

"Surveying a watercourse. Right. A kilometer away, and it took you fifteen minutes to get back to the station. What'd you do, crawl?" I leveled the

spade

at his midsection. "Or perhaps you stopped along the way to hide something heavy enough to crush a man's skull?"

Before he could reply there came a distant, dull thump from the station.

Our

four heads swung as one toward the distant domes. At first, nothing. Then a thread of black smoke rose lazily skyward.

I hurled my spade aside and took off running. Ian fell in beside me, and within seconds Gianni and Jean pulled abreast. Ahead of us, the trickle of smoke widened. "Is it one of the domes?" I called.

Jean piped up. "Either that or the comm bunker."

"Damn." Gianni's lips tightened into a slash as we charged ahead.

The comm bunker stood twenty meters outside of the station's perimeter, and

as

we passed it Gianni smiled with relief. The low, half-buried building was intact. Once in the station proper I could see the main dome rising

undamaged,

so the living quarters were safe. The dark smoke lay to our right. Suddenly Ian shouted "The cloning tanks!" and put on a burst of speed. Jean grabbed

my

arm and told me he would fetch an extinguisher; I nodded at him, and Gianni and I continued on to the smoking remains of Dome Three.

The heat from the burning building was terrific. The dome's smooth surface had

collapsed, and oily smoke rose from the shattered wreckage as the plastic bubbled and burned. Ian stood at the edge of the ruin, his chest heaving.

When

he heard our footsteps, he turned to face us. "It's a total loss," he said,

in

a raw voice. "The cloning tanks are gone."

Within a minute Jean appeared, lugging two portable fire extinguishers.

Though

fierce, the fire was small, and he and Gianni quickly eradicated it. We

stood

staring at the wreckage, the tang of scorched plastic bitter in our throats.

"So much for bringing John back," I said.

"Somebody certainly made sure that we couldn't bring him back," Ian said darkly. "First the murder, now this."

"Will it jeopardize the mission?" asked Jean.

An uneasy silence descended. Gianni broke it by saying "I'm not sure. It's up

to Ship now. After all, we've only lost one scout out of five. Yes, it was John, but we're John too, aren't we? All of us were grown from his DNA."

"Yeah, but what about his neural engram?" Ian said. "None of the four of us has John's whole mind."

That was the crux of the matter. Two billion kilometers out in space hung Ship, its precious cargo of DNA samples and neural engrams protected by that

distance from the radiation of Penny, the F3 star at the heart of this system.

Ship had arrived in-system nearly a year ago, and after determining that the

second planet had potential for a colony Ship dispatched its nanos and Von Neumann machines to construct the on-planet station. When the cloning tanks were finished, Ship sent the DNA sample for John, the mission's scout. The tanks grew five clones from the sample, and one of the clones was imprinted with John's full neural engram: his personality, memories, and sense of self.

The other four clones (Jean, Ian, Gianni, and myself) received a "tweaked" version of that engram. We shared most of John's memories, but the elements of

his original personality received different emphases in the four of us. The result was a team of five scouts with enough similarities to work well together but enough differences that our strengths would overlap and cancel out our weaknesses. Or so the theory went.

But John was the key. As the original, he possessed the ability to integrate

our data. The decision on whether to colonize this world or not ultimately rested with Ship, but John's recommendations would figure heavily into that choice. Now he was gone, and though the four of us who remained shared

John's

full engram between us, none of us held the whole of it.

One of Ian's comments tickled the back of my mind. Turning to him, I said

"What do you mean when you said somebody didn't want John brought back?"

Ian stepped up to the ruined dome, carefully plucked a piece of the wreckage

free, and brought it back to us. "Smell that?"

Gianni wrinkled his nose. "Smells like burnt plastic."

"Try again. There's a sharp undertone."

We bent our heads over the charred lump. The stench from the blackened plastic

was sharp enough to make my eyes water, but beneath it was a heavy, acrid odor. "That's cordite," Ian said. "It's the base for the explosive charges used in the seismic surveys. So this wasn't an accident."

"You run those surveys, don't you?" I said.

Ian's face darkened. "Jack, if you're suggesting—"

"Suggesting? Me?" I put on a fake smile. "Would I go around accusing people like that?"

Gianni's voice cut through the tension. "Ian? Jack? Arguing like this won't solve anything."

Maybe not, but it would be fun, I thought, and I could see a similar idea work

its way across Ian's face.

"Think of the mission," Jean said softly.

Ian nodded and broke away from me. "You're right, Jean," he said. "The

mission

comes first. John's gone, so it's up to us to make sure this world is safe for

colonization. Agreed?"

"Agreed," I said. The success of the mission was a bone-deep compulsion in all

of us; it was the single strongest part of John that we shared.

"Ship has to be told about this," Gianni said.

"That's true," Ian said. "It's also true that one of us is a murderer." The last word hung in the air as we avoided each other's eyes. "So I think we should buddy up. That way, if somebody else turns up with his skull caved in

we'll have a better idea of who the prime suspect is."

"Fine," Jean said. "I'll go with you."

"All right." Ian pivoted, turning his back on the wreckage. "Let's go to Dome

Five and count the seismic charges. Then we'll have absolute proof of whether

or not this explosion was deliberate."

"Jack and I will go to the comm bunker and report to Ship," Gianni said.

"Jack can make up his own mind, thank you very much," I retorted.

"Fine." Ian stared at me. "If you have to bury more evidence, go right ahead."

Before I could reply, Gianni cut in. "Accusations aren't going to help, Ian.

And Jack, I really do need some assistance at the comm bunker."

"Okay," I said. "I'll help. But Ian, later you and I will have to talk."

"I'm looking forward to it," Ian said. "Come on, Jean."

Jean was staring at the burned dome, his shoulders shaking. Gianni touched a

hand to his arm, and he turned to face us. His eyes were brimming with tears.

"John's really gone, isn't he? Forever and ever."

"We certainly won't see him again," Gianni said.

"I suppose Ship could bring him back," Ian said. "More of his DNA samples are

up there, and his engram. But without the experiences we've had here, he wouldn't be our John."

"You're right," Jean said, as he scrubbed his eyes with the back of his hand.

"I just didn't realize until right now that he wouldn't be back."

I looked away. John had been irritating at times, and he certainly thought that he knew best, but he did care for us. He made us get along, kept us focused on the mission. He held us together. Now he was gone, and already Ian

and I were bickering. How much longer until we all split apart?

Ian slipped an arm around Jean's shoulders and led him away from the wreckage,

toward the supply dome, while Gianni and I walked silently to the comm bunker.

I waited by the small uplink dish while Gianni punched in the bunker's access

code. Inside was cool, dim, and cramped. Hunched over, we shuffled forward and

folded ourselves into the twin plastic chairs that were the only furniture. The ceiling hung an oppressive half-meter above our heads. Gianni slid out

a keyboard and began typing. "Time for another creative report," he said.

"Why 'creative'?" I asked.

The glow from the monitors gave his face a bluish cast. "I informed Ship of

John's death, of course, but I altered the circumstances somewhat. I said we

found him in the field, that he had fallen and struck his head against a rock."

"You lied to Ship?"

"I offered a scenario that was consistent with the data," he said. The click

of his fingers on the keyboard made a precise counterpoint to his clipped voice. "Now I need a similar scenario for the destruction of Dome Three. An accident, perhaps. After all, the tanks required pure oxygen, volatile chemicals—"

I leaned over and clamped a hand on his right arm. "Gianni, lying to Ship directly violates mission guidelines."

Colors from the screen flashed across his face as he gazed at me. The eyes, the slant of the nose, the set of the jaw—I saw those identical features in the mirror every day. But the energy behind his face was different. My face in

the mirror was vibrant, shifting; Gianni's was placid, absorbed. "What is the

goal of the mission, Jack?"

"To establish a colony," I replied promptly.

"And who is best able to determine if this planet is suitable for a colony?"

"We are, of course."

"But who has the final say as to whether the planet will be colonized?"

"Ship does."

He nodded. "Precisely. But Ship is cautious, conservative. It has to be, with

ten million DNA samples tucked into its vaults. It only gets one chance to colonize a planet, so it has to have accurate, reliable data."

"Haven't we been providing that?"

"Put yourself in Ship's place," he said. "If one of your scouts had been murdered, if the cloning tanks had been sabotaged, would you trust the other

scouts?"

I frowned. "I see the problem."

"It gets worse," he said. "If this planet was barely habitable, I imagine Ship

would simply abandon us and move on to the next star on its list. However the

planet is, in fact, quite suitable for a colony. Atmospheric oxygen is a bit

above Earth-normal, and Penny runs hot in the ultraviolet, but both are within

acceptable parameters. Only one element has been unreliable, and that's us. If

you were in Ship's place, what would you do?"

I didn't like the way this conversation was heading. "I guess I'd eliminate the unreliable element."

"Exactly," he said. "Kill the scouts, rebuild the tanks, and clone a new team."

"So that's why you've been doctoring the reports."

He nodded. "But I also know that Ship is smarter than we are. If I keep reporting 'accidents,' it will become suspicious, and at that point its safest

course of action would be simply to wipe us out."

"Then we better find out who's causing the accidents," I said.

He said nothing.

"Gianni, I didn't kill John."

"Neither did I." A smile ghosted across his face. "Of course, if you ask Jean

or Ian, they'll tell you the same thing."  
"You're right." I rubbed my temples, trying to banish a budding headache.  
"You  
finished with that report?"  
He tapped a few keys, then leaned back and lifted his hands from the  
keyboard.  
"It's on its way to Ship now."  
"Okay." I rolled my head in a slow circle, but the headache had set its  
claws  
and wasn't about to be dislodged soon. "If Ship decides to wipe us and  
start  
over...Gianni, do you think we'll get any kind of warning?"  
He shrugged. "Probably not. If it was your decision, would you tell?"  
"Good point." I got to my feet, crouching to avoid the low ceiling. "I'm  
going  
to Dome Five, to talk to the others."  
"Okay. Watch out for Ian."  
"Why? Do you think he did it?"  
"I think that your minds work alike, that's all."  
"Gianni, all our minds work alike."  
He smiled tightly. "Then if you want to know who the killer is, ask how  
well  
you know yourself."  
The air outside the bunker was a warm, humid blanket. Penny hung in the sky  
like an actinic flare, and a purple smudge on the horizon warned of  
afternoon  
storms. The air in Florida was like this, the same heavy weight, the same  
promise of rain. Florida. That was John's memory. Part of his engram. I'd  
never been to Florida-hell, I'd never go-but the memory was there, fresh  
and  
vivid. The memory felt like me, even though I hadn't been there when it  
happened. My head throbbed, and I pressed my hands against my temples,  
trying  
to press the memories back into my skull. Alien images tumbled through my  
mind. Blue sky. A yellow sun. Palm trees. John's memories, not mine. But  
they  
were mine, too.  
Dangerous thoughts. We'd all been warned about identity fragmentation. If I  
split my mind into pieces, started to divide myself into "Jack" and "John,"  
that way led madness. "Gestalt" was a word that figured strongly into my  
early  
training. As Jack, I combined John's engram with memories from my own  
experiences, but I was more than a composite of those memories. "Inner  
unity,"  
the training tapes had said, in soothing tones. "You have a unique inner  
unity, a you that transcends all the pieces of you." But when the  
engram-memories intruded, that unity became a fragile thing, easily broken.  
The entrance to Dome Five stood before me, and I wasn't entirely sure how I  
had gotten there. My fingers shook as I punched the access code. Had I  
blanked  
out like that before, lost track of what I was doing? Could I have killed  
John  
in such a state and not remembered it? I swallowed and took a deep breath  
as  
the door irised open.  
Ian and Jean stood in the center of the dome, examining a computer slate.  
Both  
looked up as I entered. "Where's Gianni?" Ian asked.  
"Back at the comm bunker," I said.  
His face darkened. "We agreed to the buddy system."

"I didn't agree to anything," I said. "Look, Ian, we're adults. We're alert to the killer, he won't be able to surprise anyone. So I'll go where I please. Alone."

"Fine," he said. "Do what you want, but don't expect me to trust you."

"Don't be childish." I crossed the dome. "Did you check the seismic charges?"

Jean nodded. "Yes. One is missing. We took inventory to see if anything else had been taken, but nothing was."

"So the explosion was deliberate," I said.

"It was," Ian said.

"And whoever caused it was familiar with using explosives," I said.

Ian glared at me and plucked the slate from Jean's hands. "I'm going to report to Gianni," he said.

"What about the buddy system?" I called after him. His back stiffened, but then the door opened, admitting a gust of heat and light, and he was gone.

"Jean, I'd like to take a look at those charges," I said.

"Sure. This way." He guided me to a stack of black plastic crates. The top crate was unsealed; the interior was sectioned into nine spaces, and six of those spaces were filled with squat white cylinders. He lifted one of the cylinders free and displayed it. "Inventory control showed seven charges left in this crate. The missing one must have been used to blow up the cloning tanks."

"Is it safe to handle those things like that?" I leaned away from the explosive.

"Perfectly safe," he said, pointing to the base of the cylinder. "The detonator's in there. You unscrew the bottom, then attach it to the top. No way it can go off accidentally."

"You've used them before, then?"

"Yes. Ian's used most of them, of course, for his seismic surveys." He dropped the charge back into its cradle. "But any of us could have used one. The instructions are printed on the top of the crate."

I upended an empty fertilizer barrel and sat. "Well, we may not have the chance to use any more of them."

"Oh?" He found a full barrel, wrestled it up beside mine, and turned it into a chair. "You don't think Ship will cancel the mission, do you?"

"No, but it might cancel us." Quickly I outlined my conversation with Gianni.

Jean absorbed my words quietly, his face composed, his eyes distant. When I finished, he said "So if Ship thinks we're defective parts, it'll just replace us."

"Right. The hard truth is that we're expendable. The colony is more important than the four of us. And you know how strongly John believed in the mission."

"Indeed I do." He swept a stray lock of hair back behind his ear.

"Do you?"

"Believe in the mission?" Licked his lips, he chose his words with care.

"If this planet should turn out to be a suitable world for a colony, then yes, we need to make sure the colony gets established. If it's not, we have a duty to see that Ship goes elsewhere."

"Everything I've seen so far indicates this world would be ideal."  
"Perhaps it is," he said. "But the first three sites Ship chose from orbit for the prime colony weren't suitable. Too much seismic activity."  
"You've been helping Ian with his seismic survey, then."  
He nodded. "And I've been gathering other data. Like the planet's magnetic field. It reverses every hundred thousand years or so, and during the reversal the planet is wide open to ultraviolet and short-frequency radiation from Penny. That may be why there isn't much in the way of higher life here."  
"When's it due to flip again?"  
He sucked his lower lip. "Perhaps a few hundred years. I haven't finished my analysis of the data. And I'm sure we'll find other surprises as keep exploring. We have a lot to learn about this planet before we can okay the colony."  
"If we're around to do it," I said sourly.  
"Losing John was a blow," he conceded.  
"Did you like John?" I asked. "As a person, I mean."  
"He treated me like a brother."  
"Well, he treated me like a kid," I said. "Every time I wanted to explore a new sector, he would say 'No, Jack. Wait, Jack. We don't know if it's safe yet, Jack.'"  
Jean smiled. "I was going to add that a brother isn't necessarily an ideal person. John made it clear that he was the older brother, that he knew best."

I don't think he always took my ideas seriously."  
"He acted like his opinion was the only one that mattered."  
"I suppose it was," Jean said. "After all, Ship was going to base its decision on John's input. He had the final say."  
"And he made sure that we knew that," I added.  
"Well, he was dedicated to the mission. He wanted it to succeed."  
"So do I. So do you, and Ian, and Gianni. So why was he killed?"  
The intercom panel by the door of the dome beeped, and rather than answering my question Jean crossed over to it. After a brief conversation, he returned.  
"That was Gianni. Ian's over at the hangar, and he wants us all to join him."  
Right now."  
"The hangar?" I said, rising. "He better keep his hands off the helicopter. And my tools. I swear, if he touches any of them I'll...."  
"You'll what?" Jean's face was expressionless, but judgment lurked in his eyes.  
"I'll be really upset," I finished weakly. "Let's go."  
The hangar was a long shed on the north side of the station. Except during storms, I left the doors at either end open. Easier to get the helicopter in and out that way. Glancing at the sky, I saw that the distant smudge of clouds had solidified into a dark line, and its leading edge was heading our way.  
We entered the hangar from the east. Here were the tools and equipment I used to keep the helicopter flying. The 'copter itself, a bulbous insect of carbon fiber and plastic, filled the western half of the hangar. I knew every nook and cranny of the craft the way my tongue knew the back of my teeth, and I sized up the rest of the space with a quick glance. Tools lay scattered on the



workbench. Two drawers of the metal tool chest beside the bench jutted out halfway. Above the bench, xylophone-like, ran an ascending series of wrenches.

The second wrench from the long end was gone.

"Looking for this?" Ian stepped away from the bench and brandished the missing

wrench. Gianni, eyes hooded, stood next to him.

"What the hell are you doing with my tools?" I demanded.

"I think the question is, what were you doing with them?" He stepped closer and thrust the wrench toward me. The head of the tool bore a dark red crust. Beside me, Jean drew a sharp breath.

"I found this a hundred meters north of here, in the grass," Ian said.

"Right

where you left it after you killed John."

I lunged forward, knocking the wrench from his hand and seizing the collar of

his coveralls. Balling my hand into a fist I swung at him, but he raised a hand and intercepted the blow. His eyes glowed. "That's right, Jack, bring it

on," he said.

A weight fell across my back and arms, pulling me away. Then Jean's voice was

in my ear, telling me to stop. Gianni stepped forward, interposing his body between us. "Cut it out," he said.

Ian stepped back, breathing heavily and shaking his head. "See? I told you he

did it."

"I didn't kill John!" A shrug of my shoulders broke Jean's hold; then, with an

effort I lowered my fists. "Gianni, I didn't do it."

"Jack, it was your wrench!" Ian shouted. "And you were arguing with John the

other day. We all heard you."

"Why didn't I kill him then?" I retorted. "We were both in the hangar. Why didn't I just grab a wrench and brain him right there, rather than wait a day,

kill him, then walk all the way back through the station to dump the murder weapon?" I turned to Gianni. "Yes, I was angry with John. Hell, we were all angry with him at one time or another. If that's the motive, then we all share

it."

"You're right." He picked up the bloodstained tool and set it on the bench.

"Finding the weapon doesn't clear or condemn anyone. The hangar's open almost

all the time, and any one of us could have taken the wrench."

"That's right," I said. "Even you, Ian. In fact, it would be a great way to pin the blame on me, wouldn't it? You could take the wrench, kill John with it, stash it somewhere, then conveniently 'find' it later on."

"You expect us to believe that I killed John because I don't like you?" Ian shook his head. "You're really stretching for a reason, Jack."

"That's the problem, isn't it?" Gianni said. "Motive. We still don't know why

John was killed."

"Perhaps he could tell us," Jean said.

We all turned and stared at him.

"Seriously." He stepped toward us. "We all keep personal logs, right? So did

John. Maybe his log can suggest a motive."

After a brief pause, I said "He's got a point."

"Shouldn't we ask Ship first?" Ian said. "And how are we going to access

the

log without his password?"

"We'd better do this now, rather than waiting four hours or more for word from

Ship," Gianni said. "As for the password, leave that to me."

We returned to Dome One in pairs: Ian and Jean, Gianni and me. A shiver touched my spine as we entered John's quarters. We'd found his body there, slumped before his workstation, saturated with blood. I'd helped Gianni clean

up, and the scene was fixed in my mind. John's coveralls hung in the closet,

with shoes squared beneath them. The linens lay neatly turned down on the bed,

and the light at the workstation was angled to keep the glare off the screen.

The toothbrush was to the left of the sink, with the toothpaste perpendicular

to it. John had kept his room exactly as I kept mine. Hardly surprising; after

all, John's habits were my habits, too. But spooky. Only the smell had been different, the metallic tang of blood.

I will never forget that smell.

Gianni settled into the chair at the workstation, and the rest of us formed a

semicircle behind him as he touched the keys and called up the logon screen.

PASSWORD.

Keys rattled, and the screen flashed.

MASTER ACCESS CODE ACCEPTED. LOGGING ON TO NETWORK.

"Master access code?" Ian bent forward. "Gianni, where did you get the access code?"

"From John." Gianni swiveled to face us. "I've had it for some time. He wanted

one of us to have it, in case something should happen to him."

"I suppose it never occurred to you to tell us about that," I said.

He met my gaze. "It did occur to me. I decided not to."

I was going to lecture him about keeping secrets when the screen flashed again

and displayed the network desktop. I glanced at Ian, caught his frown, and nodded.

"That's odd," Gianni said.

"What's the matter?" asked Ian.

"I can't locate John's personal log." He tapped the keys; a box popped up on

the screen. FILE NOT FOUND.

"Try 'journal,'" suggested Jean. "Or 'diary.'"

"Just display all the files," Ian said.

Gianni complied. We bent our heads to the screen, reading the list of names.

No log. "Maybe he secured or hid the file," Jean said.

"He couldn't hide it from the master access code," Gianni said.

"Maybe he didn't keep a log," I said.

Ian snorted. "Of course he did. It's part of the mission protocol. I can't imagine John

not keeping one."

"Perhaps he did keep one, and his killer erased it," Jean said.

We nodded in unconscious unison. "There must have been something vital in there," Ian said. "Too bad we'll never know what it is."

"Wait a minute." Gianni's brow furrowed. "John made reports to Ship,

private  
reports."  
"Then we can ask Ship for copies," Ian said.  
"That may not be a good idea," I said.  
Ian glared at me. "Why not?"  
"Because Ship doesn't know John was murdered," Gianni replied.  
Ian whipped his head around. "What?"  
Briefly Gianni explained why he had altered the facts of John's death in  
his  
report to Ship. He finished by saying "From Ship's perspective, we're  
becoming  
increasingly unreliable. I thought it best to be...selective in my  
conversations with Ship. If we watch what we say, the four of us can still  
complete the mission."  
"And when we find John's killer, what then?" Ian asked. "Have you figured  
out  
what to tell Ship about that?"  
"We'll deal with that problem when we get to it," Gianni said. "In the  
meantime, I suggest we get some work done before we lose the day  
completely."  
Ian insisted that we buddy up again, so I spent several hours with Jean.  
The  
storm blew in about ten minutes after we paired up, so the afternoon was  
slow  
and dull. First Jean watched me troubleshoot the rotor assembly on the  
helicopter, and then I watched him check seedlings in the greenhouse. After  
a  
subdued dinner, I retreated to my quarters and lay on my bed with the  
lights  
off, staring out into the storm as it raked the station. Lightning  
blossomed  
in the sky, painting designs of abstract beauty that hung in space for an  
instant before the next wave obliterated them. John had loved the storms. A  
fragment of memory stirred within me: a child's game of watching the  
lightning  
flash, then counting the seconds until the deep-chested boom of thunder. I  
stared out into the rain, thinking. John had found an unusual way to  
transcend  
mortality. He had died, but his memories hadn't. Did that understanding  
strike  
him as one of us raised the wrench to smash his skull? In a split instant  
of  
white lightning, did he realize that he was a killer, too? For everything  
in  
our minds was in his mind as well, and if we could kill, so could he.  
The storm gradually spent itself, dissolving into mist and the occasional  
distant sheet of lightning. I was as awake as I'd been when I first lay  
down,  
so I swung my feet to the floor and groped for my shoes. Perhaps some clear  
air would settle my head.  
Outside was cool and fresh. The lightning-charged air, almost a living  
presence, was rich with the green scent of growing things. From the 'copter  
I'd seen more of this world than the others, and it was a young world, a  
world  
of dense foliage gorged on Penny's intense light. Crustaceans and primitive  
insects were the only fauna. The terrestrial animals waiting in Ship's  
storage  
were going to love it.  
Lights gleamed throughout the station, marking the domes and the edges of  
the

perimeter. I drifted towards the latter, staring into the deep darkness beyond. The wind brushed my hair, and I closed my eyes and let the breeze blow

through me. A good place to live. A good place to start a colony. The mission

was bigger than all of us, and despite our troubles it would succeed.

When I opening my eyes, a light gleamed off to my right, beyond the perimeter.

I consulted my mental map of the station. The comm bunker. I stepped toward the dim glow and watched it swell. Definitely the bunker, and someone was in

there. I broke into a run.

The door to the bunker was shut, but lights glowed in the windows, and as I drew near a shadow passed across the light. Wishing I had picked up a branch

or a rock, I stepped up to the door panel, tapped the access code, and launched myself through the door just as it dilated open. A figure stood hunched over a panel, hands on the keyboard, head swinging to face me. Ian. With a shout, I hurled myself at him.

"Jack, wait—" he said, but then I was upon him, driving a shoulder into his side. I started in with my fists: arm, chest, jaw. The last blow glanced off

the side of his head as he twisted away and raised his own fists in defense.

Two quick blocks, and he threw himself forward, wrapping me up in a clinch.

"Jack, stop! Listen to me!"

I twisted in his grip. "What's this? More sabotage? Or maybe you're trying to

sneak a message to Ship." I tried a punch to his gut, but the angle was wrong

and the blow landed weakly.

"No." He tightened his grip. "I'm trying to find John's reports."

"John's reports?" I stopped struggling.

"Remember how Gianni told us that John made reports to Ship? I figured there'd

be a record of the transmissions somewhere. That's what I'm looking for."

Ian

loosened his arms. "Look, we can pound each other all night, or you can help

me out. Truce?"

"Truce."

He dropped his hold. "You can use the other console."

Working together, it only took us a few minutes to find the transmission logs

and separate

out John's reports. We found several dozen of them, filed almost every other

day. "Where should we start?" asked Ian.

"Let's look at the last reports and work our way back," I said.

"Fine." He tapped a command.

PRIVILEGED FILE. MASTER ACCESS CODE REQUIRED.

"The hell?" Ian turned to me. "Why the security lockout?"

"Beats me," I said. "Try another." We tried six more files; all were locked under the master access code. "Looks like we'll need Gianni to read these."

"Looks like." Ian frowned. "But I can't imagine why Gianni would seal John's

records, unless—"

"Unless he has something to hide," I said.

Ian nodded. "I think we should talk to him. Now."

"Good idea." I followed him through the cool midnight back to Dome One,

where

he thumbed the intercom panel outside Gianni's quarters and asked him to open

up. The door slid open to reveal a yawning, bare-chested figure. "What is it?"

he said blearily.

"We've just come from the comm bunker," Ian said. "John's reports to Ship have

been sealed with the master access code. Care to explain why?"

Gianni blinked the sleep from his eyes and considered each of us in turn. He

sat on the bed and combed a hand through his hair, a gesture I found instantly

familiar. When he spoke, however, his words had a measured edge I never used.

"After seeing what happened to John's log, I thought it best to seal his reports, just in case whoever erased the log decided to finish covering his tracks."

"Unless you were the one who erased John's log in the first place," Ian said.

"Then you could cover your own tracks by sealing the reports."

"I suppose I could," Gianni said. "But wouldn't it be easier for me just to erase the reports as well, if that were the case?"

"Not if you were trying to divert attention from yourself. If both the reports

and the log had been erased, then we would have suspected you right away."

Gianni rubbed his jaw. "Let me get this straight. If I were guilty of killing

John...that's what you're really accusing me of, isn't it?...then I would have

erased both the log and the reports. But since I didn't erase both, then I must be guilty as well, since I'm trying to cover my tracks. I'm damned if I

do and damned if I don't."

Ian scowled. "Fine. But we still want to see those reports."

Gianni looked a question at me, and I nodded. "All right," he said. "Let me get a shirt and shoes."

Back at the comm bunker, Gianni settled before a console while Ian and I stood

flanking him. After entering the master access code, he asked us what we wanted to see. We started with John's final report, which turned out to be

a dry summation of weather data, along with a request to implement "Protocol D."

A quick search through the last month of reports revealed only that John was

determined to see the mission succeed. Several other mentions of "Protocol D"

were made. After twenty minutes of reading, I suggested that these reports didn't show a man afraid for his life.

"You're right," Ian said. "Irritated, maybe, but not afraid."

"True," I said. None of us fared well in John's reports. He thought I was undisciplined and too eager. Ian was criticized for being too slow, Jean wasted his time with "groundless concerns," and Gianni was "a dead weight"

who

spent too much time with the computers and comm system.

"Actually, these reports are interesting for what isn't in them," Ian said.

"Oh?" asked Gianni.

"My seismic reports, for one." He brought up a report from three weeks ago.

"This was the day that I told him the three primary colonization sites were

in

seismically unstable zones. You'd think he'd pass that information to Ship, but there's no mention of it. Not here, and not in later reports."

"Did you tell Jean that information?" I asked.

"Yeah. Why?"

"He mentioned it to me." I stared at the screen. "John was painting rather

a

rosy picture, wasn't he? Nothing bad about this planet at all."

"Well, it's a good planet," Ian said defensively. "It's a good place for a colony."

"Good, yes, but is it the best?" I stretched my shoulders. "Look at it from Ship's

perspective. Ship only gets one chance to establish a colony, so it has to be

perfect. This planet is close, but it's not quite there."

"What's your point?"

"John wanted the mission to succeed. He wanted the colony to be here.

Suppose

he doctored the data to make sure the colony would settle here?"

"So he was enthusiastic," Ian said. "That's hardly a crime." Bending forward,

he touched a finger to the screen. "What's this 'Protocol D'?"

"I was wondering about that myself," I said. "Have you checked on it, Gianni?"

He shifted in his chair. "Perhaps."

"'Perhaps?'" Ian echoed. "What kind of answer is that? Either you did or you

didn't, and I'm sure you did. I would have. Wouldn't you, Jack?"

"You bet," I said.

"So what is it, Gianni?"

"All right." He sighed and tapped keys. Words scrolled across the screen.

"There," he said, pushing himself away from the console.

We craned our necks to read the screen. Protocol D was part of the Mission Implementation Alternatives, one of the vast maze of directives that

covered

every possible contingency related to the colonization effort. I studied the

dense jargon, seeking to unravel it. In the event of failure of modified neural engram establishment, or incomplete implementation of modified

neural

engram, the defective copy is to be eradicated and replaced with a copy bearing a full and complete implementation of the modified neural engram,

such

determination to be made by the holder of the complete neural engram, with concurrent authorization through Ship's Intelligence.

"'The defective copy is to be eradicated,'" I quoted. "That means 'killed', right?"

"That's right," Gianni said.

"Why would John want to kill us?" asked Ian.

"I've thought about this for a while," Gianni said. "You see, we weren't getting the results he wanted. We kept finding little things that were

wrong

with this world. He omitted those problems from his reports to Ship, but he was probably worried that one of us would send our own report to Ship, or perhaps record something in our logs that Ship would eventually discover.

We

were all a potential threat to the mission. So he wanted to replace us with copies or clones that would be less of a threat. All he had to do was get Ship's permission and tweak his neural engram slightly, to ensure a group

of

loyal replacements."

"So that's why you killed him," I said.

Gianni shook his head. "I didn't kill him. I blew up the cloning tanks. No tanks, no way for John to replace us."

"Wait a minute," Ian said. "The tanks blew before John was killed."

Gianni smiled thinly. "I set the charge just before John's body was discovered. In the ensuing confusion, I didn't have an opportunity to deactivate it."

I laughed. "So instead of preventing John from replacing us, you prevented us

from replacing John."

Gianni nodded. "Of course, now we've got a new problem. What do we tell Ship?

That this planet isn't as ideal as it thinks? Suppose it decides to abandon us

and move on to the next world on its list?"

"We better put all our heads together on this one," Ian said. "Gianni, give Jean a call. We'll need him for this decision."

We turned back to John's reports while Gianni tried the intercom. "Jean's not

in his room," he said. "I'll try an open call." He touched a key. "Jean? It's

Gianni. Please report."

Silence.

"Jean, we need you to make a decision about the mission. Please report."

The intercom hissed, and then Jean's voice came through, flat and calm.

"I've

already made my decision, Gianni."

We exchanged glances. "Jean, where are you?" Gianni asked.

"Dome Five."

Ian blanched. "The charges," he whispered.

Gianni stabbed the intercom key. "We'll be right there, Jean. Don't do anything, okay? Just stay put." Without waiting for a reply, we bolted out of

the bunker and across the station.

The west wind had continued to blow after the storm passed, tearing the clouds

into long, tattered streamers. Stars sparkled in the patches of clear sky, and

faint light from one of the distant moons flickered in and out. The domes of

the station were dim shapes in the darkness, save for the solitary light that

glowed at the entrance of Dome Five. Breathing hard, I ducked through the open

door and stepped sideways to allow Ian and Gianni to enter.

"I'm glad you're here," Jean said. "We should be together for this." In his hand he held a plastic cylinder, capped with a blinking red light. A dozen or

more cylinders formed a circle on the floor around him, winking like infernal

fireflies.

Ian gasped and lunged toward Jean; I grabbed his shoulder and hauled him back.

"Don't push him," I warned.

"Those charges will level everything in two hundred meters," Ian said, his voice low.

"Let's just worry about getting the one out of his hand, okay?" I squeezed Ian's shoulder, and when he nodded I released him.

Meanwhile Gianni had taken several cautious steps forward, until he stood

just

outside the ring of explosives. "Why do we need to be together for this, Jean?"

Jean focused on Gianni. "Because we understand each other. Because you'll know

why this has to be done. I could never make John understand." His hand tightened on the charge. "Why couldn't I make him understand?"

"John could be stubborn," I said, loudly enough so Jean could hear.

"Remember

how we talked about this, Jean? We knew he was pig-headed about the mission."

"The mission," he repeated. Some of the tension drained from his muscles.

"The

mission must succeed. This is the world, the right world. The mission must succeed." His head snapped up. "But it can't. Too many flaws. Ian's seismic data, my data on magnetic anomalies. Ship's guidelines say it's not safe enough."

Ian nudged me. "Magnetic anomalies?" he whispered.

"He discovered that the planet's magnetosphere reverses itself every hundred

thousand years, leaving the surface vulnerable to radiation from Penny," I explained. Raising my voice, I added "Jean, you told me the magnetic

reversal

wouldn't occur for another five hundred years or so."

"I can't be sure." His mouth hardened. "We're already within the predicted margin of error, it could happen at any time. I had to tell John. I wanted the

mission to succeed as much as he did...more than he did...."

"What did John say?" Gianni's voice was calm.

Jean's face twisted into a childish expression of angry disbelief. "He told me

it wasn't important. He said Ian and I were getting worked up over nothing.

He

was going to tell Ship we were ready for the second phase, to set up the cloning tanks and send down the samples. The mission had to succeed. When I said it was too dangerous, he laughed and told me to go work with Jack,

that

Jack was the only one of us who wasn't scared of his own shadow.

"So I went to the hangar, but Jack wasn't there. I saw his tools....Then I was

back in John's quarters, a wrench in my hands. His log was open. He yelled at

me." Jean's voice was full of hurt. "He said he was sick of me, sick of all of

us, that he couldn't wait to get rid of us, replace us with copies who'd help

him out for a change. He was so angry, until he saw the wrench...." Jean fell

silent.

Softly, Gianni said "His log?"

"He suspected us," Jean said. "Suspected me. His log would endanger the mission. I had to erase it. The mission had to succeed." His eyes grew troubled. "But it couldn't. It wasn't safe. It had to succeed, but it couldn't, and it was my fault. My fault."

Gianni was close to him now. "It's all right," he said. "You did your best, Jean, the very best you could. You've done enough, and you need to rest."

Jean stared at Gianni without really seeing him. His mouth worked, but no sound came out. Then his arm sagged, as if the seismic charge suddenly weighed

a hundred kilos. Gianni quickly stepped forward and caught him in a hug.



"I've got you, Jean," he whispered fiercely. "I won't let you go." Jean's eyes closed, and tears trickled down his cheeks. "Ian?" Gianni's voice was dangerously quiet. "The charge?" Ian hustled forward and slipped the cylinder from Jean's weak grip. His fingers danced over the top of the cylinder, and the light winked out. He quickly scanned the other armed charges. "He didn't set any of the timers," Ian said. "I can deactivate the rest of the charges by hand. Just get him out of here."

Jean said nothing as we guided him back to his room. He sat on the bed, slack-faced, unresponsive. We tiptoed out of his quarters and locked him in, then returned to Dome Five, where Ian was returning the last of the charges to their crates. "So what do we tell Ship now?" he asked. "We could tell it the truth," Gianni said. "Then we'll have to tell it that John's engram is unstable," I said. "How so?" Ian folded his arms and stared at me. "All of our engrams are based on John, right? We each have some of his strengths and weaknesses. If one of us is homicidal, that means John is homicidal, too." I waited for that to sink in, then continued. "John wanted the mission to succeed, even to the extent of covering up the truth to ensure its success. I wonder how Ship will react to learning that John is exactly the wrong person for his job. It might drift through space forever, unable to trust its own scout."

"There's another option," Gianni said. "We lie. We maintain John's cover-up, and once the colony is established we tell the colonists about the seismic and magnetic problems."

Ian nodded. "We're all agreed that this world is good enough, right? Besides, Ship will never find a perfect world, anyway."

"This was supposed to be John's decision," I said. "Are we really qualified to make it?"

Gianni smiled. "Well, between us we're the best three-fourths of John. I guess we'll have to do." His smile faded. "But what about Jean?"

"I don't know," I said. "I don't think he'll cause any more trouble, though. Maybe one of the colonists will be able to do something for him."

"I'll watch him," Ian said. "I can play big brother. Anyway, all he ever wanted was somebody to look up to."

"Well, it looks like I've got another report to prepare," Gianni said. "The mission has to succeed, doesn't it? After all, it's what we were made for." I smiled. "No. It's what we choose to do."

"More Than Kin" marks Jeff Verona's second appearance in Neverworlds. In addition to writing, he reviews short fiction for Tangent ([www.sfsite.com/tangent](http://www.sfsite.com/tangent)) and teaches college-level courses in Science Fiction Literature and Creative Writing. He can be reached via email at

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