

NETWALK

**FOUNDATIONS:
OF BOYFRIENDS AND
MOTHERS AND DAUGHTERS,
OH MY!
TAKE THREE**



JOYCE REYNOLDS-WARD

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by

Joyce Reynolds-Ward

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OF BOYFRIENDS AND MOTHERS AND DAUGHTERS, OH MY! TAKE THREE

What the hell? Will Landreth scowled at the strangest thing he'd ever seen since dying and becoming a Netwalker. He'd followed the key his daughter Melanie had given him to his wife Diana's Netwalk chip, to--*this*? An opaque white cube floated in front of him in virtual space, sharply outlined against the darkness of virtual shot through by colorful packet flows. The cube put off the same deep sub-bass rumble and sharp vibrations of the Shadow Chamber, where rogue Netwalkers and possibly the Gizmo device were exiled.

But this was in Diana's chip. Will had been to the Chamber before, and this wasn't where the Chamber was supposed to be. *This was in Diana's chip.*

And, perhaps, this was the explanation for some of their problems with the Netwalker Sarah Stephens. Will's own refuge in his host's chip didn't look or feel anything at all like this impenetrable white cube. He'd seen other Netwalkers' refuges upon their invitation, as part of his ongoing research. Theirs all resembled his--some sort of variation of a virtual 3-D schematic on a chip, open and airy, tied into virtual linkages even when the user was recharging and resting. Or hiding. But this cube, this *thing*, had no linkages. It floated in virtual space with no packet flows touching it. If anything, the flows deliberately angled away from the cube.

Will became aware that he had shrunk down in size while pondering the cube. *Not enough body awareness.* If this thing really did have some sort of tie to the Chamber, then small and insignificant wouldn't make any difference to its abilities. He made himself big again, thinking about snowboarding. Those memories and that shape helped when he had to be aggressive in virtual.

I can't contact Sarah, Melanie had said when she'd given him the virtual key to Sarah's space in Diana's chip. *This isn't usual. There's always something odd going on when Mom locks Sarah down, but I usually know why Sarah got locked down. This time I don't know why, Dad, and all of my Enforcer tools can't get me in to her. I've allowed Mom to handle Sarah in her own way in the past, even when I've disagreed with her choices, but--now even Mom's personal Enforcer is worried. Sarah's been in the chip long enough to go nuts. She doesn't handle extended chip lockdown well. I think it's time for a Netwalker to try getting to Sarah to find out what's going on--and you're my best choice.*

Humming soundlessly (even without a body, certain flesh habits still clung for focusing and other purposes), Will rode a virtual skateboard around the cube, scanning for any input or output links. There wasn't much, certainly nothing of the level he'd measured from other Netwalker refuges.

The skateboard warned him before he ran over the sensor node. It stopped sharply, like he'd programmed it to do, issuing him a quick but detailed warning before shutting down and disappearing, leaving Will hanging in a temporary safe spot.

"Now what's this?" he murmured, studying the node. Will didn't expect any auditory reaction from it. The data from the skateboard sensors indicated that contact with either packet flows or a virtual personality set it off. *Would work to detect most Netwalkers. But I'm not most Netwalkers.* He squatted to study the sensor further, then flopped on his back to pull off the reporting data link from underneath the node, and traced it back.

Curious. Direct report to Diana. High sensitivity to the virtual markers of Melanie, her daughter Bess, her husband Marty, and Marty's Netwalker Ness.

Near as I can tell, I'm not included in the lockout. That makes things a little bit easier.

Oversight on his wife's part, or trap? Nevermind, he'd handle it as if it were a trap. Will delicately spun a counterblock from virtual matter, coding it to override any awareness of his markers. He delicately cloned off the node's programming and ran his counterblock by it in a quick sim. He corrected one small program segment and nodded when it passed his second test.

<No time like the present.> He transmitted the new programming to the sensor, ready to flee if Diana showed any awareness that her sensor network was being tampered with.

No response. *She's forgetting what I taught her years ago.* The thought saddened him. Old age or something else? The things Melanie hadn't said but he'd sensed were worrisome. Melanie had spent enough time in virtual that she projected deeper concerns nonverbally as well as any Netwalker. Something was changing Diana, and--she wasn't the woman he had loved when he was alive. She'd barely acknowledged his existence as Netwalker when he'd died, and things hadn't improved. *It's been--what? Thirty years?* Maybe that was Sarah's influence on her, or a fear that too much friendliness

to another Netwalker would anger Sarah.

But that didn't explain everything about the changes in Diana. She'd spent a lot of time in close proximity to Gizmo. Melanie worried about Gizmo constantly, but given how Gizmo had tried to kill her daughter Bess shortly after she was born, those concerns were explainable. Diana's cavalier attitude about Gizmo exposure was something else.

Will moved in cautiously. He detected and dealt with two other warning networks, still soundlessly humming as he worked. *Melanie didn't say that reaching Sarah would be this difficult.* But he should have known. If it were easy, Melanie would have successfully contacted Sarah and he wouldn't be tiptoeing around in another Netwalker's chip without their invitation. At last he reached the cube itself. Pausing, he brought out Melanie's key and studied it, frowning. Given what he'd already encountered, would this key work, or would it trigger further defenses?

Assume more defenses. Always assume more defenses. He cloned off the key programming. This was slower and more difficult work, requiring a deeper level of concentration as he tweaked the Melanie markers to himself, testing and retesting the changes to ensure that they didn't change the key's basic programming.

Done. Will laid the key directly against the wall of the cube. A small square opened. He had to shrink to slide through, and then the square closed behind him. *Am I trapped in here, too?*

Where's Sarah? Key concern--find Sarah, worry about getting out later. Sarah was the strongest and most predatory Netwalker outside of the Chamber. Will looked around. He startled as a figure unfolded in the far corner, looking around wildly.

"Sarah?" he ventured.

"Who the hell are you?" Sarah leapt up, expanding to twice her normal size. Will stretched to meet her, still keeping his snowboarder self primary. Sarah manifested her feral shape, with elongated, near-skeletal limbs, sharp claws and pointed teeth. A shredded white winter stealthsuit hung in tatters from her frame, and tousled white hair accented her red, bulging eyes.

"Will Landreth. Your son-in-law when we were in the meat. Netwalker. You killed me. Remember?" Will forced himself to stare steadily at feral Sarah, most dangerous of all the forms she could take. To his relief, she didn't advance on him but stood staring. *Not right. Not right at all.* Sarah shouldn't be wearing this manifestation of herself in the chip. Not under normal circumstances. This shape only happened when Sarah had been infected by a virus, or had her power levels drawn down away from her charging site in Diana's chip--but if Sarah had been infected, wouldn't Diana have hollered for someone to come treat Sarah? Was Diana doing this on purpose?

He knew what his answer would have been once upon a time. But now?

God, Di, what are you doing to her?

"Will?" The voice wasn't feral Sarah.

Will remained alert, however, uncertain what Sarah's next move would be. *Wait for her.* Sarah was capable of very devious behavior.

"It's really--Will?" Sarah's eyes changed back to her normal gray-blue and she straightened up. Her teeth and fingernails returned to normal but she still wore the shredded stealthsuit.

That's encouraging. He could dare a response without worrying that some random detail would give her a reason to attack him.

"Melanie tried to get in but she couldn't. She gave me her key. Sarah, what the hell is going on? You've been in here for three days." Even if she didn't know for certain, maybe he could get some clues from what Sarah *did* know about her plight.

Sarah swallowed hard, eyes darting around. "This isn't necessarily a secure place."

"I can try to make it more secure."

"Ha!" Sarah bit back further comment. Then, more quietly, "You did get in here. If anyone can secure this place, you can. Don't risk it for long, Will."

Even without a body the warning in Sarah's words chilled him. *This isn't her usual behavior.* Will quickly spun a secure virtual hologlobe. "Come here," he said, stifling a shudder at the thought of being locked in the globe with Sarah. If this was just a ploy on her part--no. At some point he had to start trusting her. This wasn't a good situation for her to be in.

Sarah shuffled over next to Will. He activated the globe, then sat cross-legged, floating near the middle. Sarah's form changed as well to a younger persona, clad informally in jeans and a soft red

pullover. *Don't think I ever saw Sarah dressed that casually in life!* This Sarah looked to be in her twenties, someone he'd only seen in pictures. She reclined in a chair that Will couldn't see. A heavy blue-gray shackle with inset neon-green lines that glowed menacingly throughout the shackle's surface appeared on her right wrist.

"Better. Much better. Thank you, Will. Even this little bit is--a relief."

"What's going on? What is Diana doing to you?"

"I don't think it is Diana doing this of her own will. It's Gizmo," Sarah said, voice low. She held out her right wrist to Will. "Can you break this? Gizmo's using it to keep me locked in this damn room."

Will examined the shackle. "Who locked this on you? Diana?"

"No. I had a run-in with Gizmo." Sarah glanced around cautiously. "It started mucking around with Diana and I tried to stop it. So it locked me down. I have no idea what it's doing to her."

"She's being evasive about why you're locked down. Melanie hasn't been able to talk to her directly, and Deirdre Conley can't get through to you either."

Will frowned as he studied the shackle further. He blinked up schematics from records he'd kept over many years--ah. Yes. This wasn't the first time a Gizmo analogue had used this form of shackle, though this one appeared to be more complex than the last one. He weighted the appropriate charge in his index fingers, rechecked the schematic, then pressed delicately in two places. A puff of what would have been smoke in meat life startled him back.

"OW!" Sarah yelled. "Will, damn it, that BIT me! Careful! That could be a warning--"

"Duly noted," Will muttered. He checked his perimeter warnings and upped sensor sensitivity. Then he looked back at his schematics. If that decoding didn't work, there was a deeper and more complex coding to consider. *And if that one doesn't work, we're in trouble because I know that one will trigger Diana and Gizmo.* He reviewed his steps one more time, then gently pressed all ten fingers onto the shackle's sensor pads. He felt a tingle in his fingertips, but--nothing. He pressed more firmly. Something yielded but the shackle didn't release. Will weighted the pressure more on his index and ring fingers of his left hand.

Pressure released. The shackle snapped open. Sarah yanked her arm away from the shackle and it clacked shut on itself, folding repeatedly until it was the size of a pinhead. "I wouldn't let that float free," she advised.

"Got it." Will deployed one of his favorite devices, a trap door chip keyed to him and him alone, no Enforcers like Melanie, no Netwalkers. It was his insurance against predatory attacks. Sarah couldn't take this chip from him and while he hadn't tried it with this Gizmo analogue before, hopefully it was enough like the other analogues he'd encountered that it lacked enough sentience to overrule his chip's programming.

Nonetheless, he strengthened his defenses. The trap door gobbled up the shackle mote. For safety's sake, Will sealed it away in a packet. Once free of this place, he'd send it to the lab of his chip host, Julia, for further study.

Sarah sighed and sat up. "We've got big problems, Will."

"I figured as much. What's going on?"

"Gizmo's influencing Diana more and more. She doesn't realize it."

"Are you safe?"

"I--may not be." Sarah got up and began to pace. "Maybe I'm paranoid. But talking to Diana is far too reminiscent of talking to Francis Stewart before he disappeared."

"Just what did happen to Francis?"

Sarah shrugged. "You know as much as I do. He went out after Gizmo and didn't come back. I've seen him in the Gizmo virtual core, along with Liam Jeffreys and Tim Conley. I'd assume that means he's dead and Gizmo assimilated him. I just don't know if it was willing or not. With Francis--it could have gone either way."

"Damn." Will conjured up the snowboard and took it for a quick twist and spin, grabbing more air than he ever could have done in his own body. He nailed the landing and skidded to a stop.

Sarah scowled at him. "We don't have a lot of time for that snow bum screwing around! Those sensors inside the white room are time-dependant. We can only evade them for so long."

Will shrugged off her criticism. "Figures. Well, what are we going to do? How do we get

through to Diana to let her know that she's compromised?"

"I don't think we have the time to blast through to her. We've got to go through Melanie and keep Bess safe. Whatever's going on, Gizmo's ultimate target is Bess. I've been able to gather that much. What I can't figure out is what role Diana plays. Gizmo's influencing her in odd ways--for example, Diana's not been taking care of herself. I usually can remind her or do little tweaks to keep her healthy, she's not had problems with that in the past. Now I can't. Gizmo blocked me the last time I tried, and--well--that's why I'm here."

"Sounds like Gizmo may be trying to force you to take the Option and jump into Bess." That was the most likely option. If Diana died, Sarah needed to have a new live host--and so far, that was something they'd not done with Netwalk. A new concern intruded. "Is Diana uploading?" *What happens if Diana uploads herself? She used to be adamant that she wouldn't upload, so we haven't planned for her to have a Netwalk host. Melanie? Bess is automatically tied in to Sarah. Alex Jeffreys? No, he's targeted for a different Netwalker. Do we have someone trying to steal Netwalkers?* That part did make sense in a bizarre manner.

Melanie needed to know about this, fast. Diana had always claimed she wouldn't upload, but if Gizmo was influencing her, that could change.

"It's very possible. To both things." Sarah wrapped her arms around her legs, resting her chin on her knees. "I'm not sure if Diana's prepared a death upload link. But I wouldn't bet against it."

"Damn," Will repeated. He had to get this information to Melanie. But Sarah also needed to get out of here. "What can I do to help you right now, Sarah? Should we set up the transfer with Bess?"

"Hold--that option for a bit longer," Sarah said slowly. "I can help keep Diana alive while Melanie and Deirdre go in after Gizmo. Hopefully that will be all that needs to happen. They've done that exorcism before. If we can hold off the transfer just a bit longer--Diana's planning to retire soon. When she retires from the Corporate Courts, then we can switch me over to Bess, hopefully in a much less stressful period."

If Diana lives that long. He had to wonder after all this. Gizmo wasn't easy on humans, live or virtual. Since Sarah had been performing maintenance work--*just what the hell was she doing?*--it was entirely possible that Diana's health could take a steep decline without Sarah inside to watchdog her. *Probably best not to share that thought with Sarah!* "You going to be able to stay sane in here?" Will waved at the whiteness around them.

"If you've got a tool I can use to get out, I'd sure appreciate it," Sarah said softly.

Will studied her, considering. Giving Sarah an escape tool might not be the best of choices. But, given the situation--he'd much rather deal with a Sarah free from a Diana possessed by Gizmo than a Sarah driven crazy by lack of external contact with the real world. Netwalkers needed to be able to take in outside sensations or they'd go slowly insane from sensory deprivation. And Bess was at least nominally ready to take Sarah on.

Worth the risk. He made the decision and pulled out his key. Aware of Sarah's eyes on him while he cloned the key, he focused on the markers that he'd changed from Melanie to himself. How best to show her what to do to change the markers? He couldn't do this piece for Sarah, she had to sync the key to her markers herself. Color coding for the markers. That would do it. He programmed the code in. "Touch the green spot," he told Sarah.

"There's another," she said after touching it.

"Keep touching until they're all gone."

At last she finished touching the key. "Now what?"

"Hide it on you. Here." He pulled out another device, a strength enhancer that would boost the key's power. "Couple it with this, and you'll blow your way right through the wall. But this other allows you to be a bit more sneaky." *Have to watch her in the long run with this tool.* But, given these circumstances, he didn't have a lot of options.

Sarah tucked the key away in a sleeve holster he didn't realize until then that she had, and put the enhancer in her other sleeve. "Thanks, Will." She brushed her hands through her disheveled hair. "I won't misuse it."

"I'd better go. Melanie needs to know what's going on."

Sarah's hand closed on his. Will tensed, ready to stave off an attack, but nothing happened.

"Thank you. If you can let me know when they stage their exorcism of Gizmo--"

"I'll come tell you myself," he promised.

"Better get going," she warned.

"On my way."

As Will carefully wended his way out of the virtual networks tied to Diana's Netwalk chip, he had time to think about the irony. Years ago, when they were both alive, he and Sarah would never have cooperated like they did now, as Netwalkers.

Situations change.

In the long run, change was the only thing he could count upon.

#

Marty Fielding hesitated at the doorway to the family dining room in Do It Right's Hoodland compound. His mother-in-law Diana Landreth stared out the window at the dry and straggling trees on the ridges, the spruce and Douglas fir and cedar getting brown and skeletal, the yellowing leaves of the alder trees which had poked in between the dying conifers out of place on this spring morning.

I so do not want to do this. But after Bess's meltdown yesterday, Melanie was in no state to deal reasonably with yet another petition from her mother for DIR to rejoin the Corporate Courts. *I don't care how you tell her, she had told Marty. The answer is no, no, and still no, damn it. Our daughter will not be exposed to Gizmo and I'm not going there either.*

Bitter words best not spoken to her mother, not in these times of delicate maneuvering for High Space contracts. That's why he was here and not Mel.

Showtime. Let's get this done.

Marty coughed to alert Diana of his presence and went over to the bar. "Good morning, Diana," he said as he grabbed a mug and poured coffee. "Want some coffee?" He waved the carafe at her.

Diana shook her head, seemingly rapt in studying the ridges. "No thank you, Marty. Those trees still aren't coming right. Damn it."

"Sarah's last legacy. Or was it Peter's move?" Marty decided to start with the black coffee. It certainly smelled inviting enough to drink black for once. He settled in the deep barrel chair, angled so that Diana would have to turn away from the window to look at him.

"I think it was my brother's doing to spray that defoliant before landing," Diana muttered. She turned to face Marty. "I thought Melanie was meeting with me this morning."

Marty shook his head. "She's with Bess."

Diana frowned. "Bess is okay?"

"She had another meltdown yesterday."

"Damn." Diana glanced toward the window again, biting her lip. "I was hoping that things would change as Bess got older."

"Not yet." He sipped his coffee. Silence pooled between them, heavy with things still unsaid. Marty held the silence, waiting Diana out.

"I suppose this is a bad time to talk about bringing Do It Right back into the Courts," Diana said finally, sitting up.

"Not as long as the Courts still require Melanie to have a Gizmo link and Bess to be presented to Gizmo."

"Is that why you're here and not Melanie?" Diana's mouth quirked into a half-smile, half-frown.

"Believe me, I'm the rational person on this subject," Marty said, swallowing more coffee. It tasted raw and bitter, fiery all the way down. He put it aside. "We decided this was best."

"We need you and Melanie as part of the Courts team," Diana said.

"I can consult." Marty studied his hands rather than look at Diana. "Melanie is firm, though. No cooperation with the Corporate Courts except to deal with Disruption, Dialogue, or Netwalk issues. Even then, she wants the contacts for her to come through Deirdre Conley. I can consult but I can't be exposed to Gizmo. It's too great a risk to Bess."

"I think you two are being overly cautious. And you're isolating yourselves."

Marty shook his head. "You've not seen Bess in a full meltdown. You've not dealt with the aftereffects."

"Seizures?"

"Head banging. Self-injury." He stared directly at Diana, his own anger and fatigue growing as he remembered how scary this last meltdown had been, his voice rising and sharpening as he spoke. "She'll do anything to shut down sensory inputs, and if that means taking a knife or blunt object to herself to bash them out of her head, she will. Yesterday, Alex Jeffreys was out on maneuvers when she melted down. It took both Melanie and Nik to keep Bess from gouging her eyes out, then to disarm and sedate her. When she woke, it would have started all over again except Alex was there. She can't shield herself from virtual inputs, and when Gizmo starts poking at her without Alex around like it did yesterday, she has no defenses. *No defenses at all,*" he spat out. "Yesterday, she also sliced her wrists up so badly that we had to transfuse her. She's black and blue from banging her head and thrashing around. She broke two fingers. Mel and Nik are bruised and Bess got Mel in her left hand with the knife." He took a deep breath. "Bess is fast and these meltdowns happen without warning because we never know when a Gizmo contact will trigger one. So you wonder why we're reluctant to rejoin the Corporate Courts and expose Bess and Melanie to Gizmo again? God, you're clueless!"

<Melanie, I can't do this!> he sent subvocally, hoping he didn't trigger Bess into another meltdown from this short contact. <She just doesn't get it! I blew up on her. Told her exactly what happened yesterday. Not quite explicit detail but close.>

<Okay, we're committed. Let's stop dancing around the subject like we have been. She wants to push it, I'm tired of shielding her from what the consequences could be for her granddaughter. I'm sending Mom a visual of Bess's current condition,> Melanie answered. <Tell me how she reacts.>

It only took a moment.

Diana flinched and closed her eyes, shaking her head. "Okay. Okay. Melanie, I *get it*. Oh my God. Marty, tell her *I get it*, I don't need to keep seeing that picture."

<It hit her. *Finally.*> "That picture is what we have to live with," Marty said bitterly. "*That picture* is Gizmo's legacy to Bess. We've tried to spare you the details, but if you don't get it--"

<Oh hell. Bess is starting to react.>

Marty quickly shut down the link.

Diana sagged back in relief. "Marty, I didn't know--"

"We've tried to tell you, over and over again for the past two years. Any contact with Gizmo packets and Bess can turn self-destructive. *Any* contact, but not *every* contact. We still don't know what the specific triggers are that Gizmo pushes but it is a Gizmo contact. Bess may be having another meltdown right now because Melanie's sending you that picture might have been enough virtual exposure to send her into overload!" He closed his fingers into fists, fighting back the urge to get up and go check on his wife and daughter. So far he didn't hear any Security alerts. A good sign.

"Can you do anything? My God, Marty."

"We don't dare put a chip in her until she's fourteen at the earliest."

Diana blanched. "Nine years? Can't you do something sooner than that?"

"Not until she's fourteen. Then we can see if the Netwalk chip will help her shield and block unwanted virtual input. If it works, then we'll be able to channel her talent. When she's not reacting to Gizmo, she's even more natural in virtual settings than Mel. But that's just it. We can't train her for virtual work until she's mature enough for a chip without risking what you just saw. So why the hell would we want to expose her to Gizmo until she's got some sort of protection against it?"

Diana fell silent. Marty grabbed his mug and went back to the bar to add cream and sugar to his coffee. When the color almost matched his red-brown skin, he returned to the chair. This time the coffee was less fiery and more soothing as he took a tentative sip.

"All right," Diana finally said, her voice quiet. She rose. "Since you're dealing with a Bess meltdown, I won't impose any longer." She sighed. "I'm probably likely to trigger another meltdown in Bess if I try to see Melanie and Bess, right?"

"Mel would have to screen you first. Right now any contact could set Bess off. I'm hoping Mel's quick subvocal was shielded enough to protect her."

Diana waved her right hand. "No, no, Melanie doesn't need that right now. But Marty. At some point I do need to work with you and Melanie on a Courts-related initiative. I will go back to the Courts and see about setting up a structure so that you can isolate the Gizmo linkages from Bess

and help us with this project." She half-smiled. "I guess I can pick up that much of a clue." She picked up her tablet and headed for the door. "See you later."

That easy? He rose to shake Diana's hand in farewell. "Thank you," he said, relieved.

Diana studied him. "I've got Sarah yelling at me to stop being an idiot. She was horrified by that picture, and--Bess projects very well to Sarah in this close proximity. Sarah *feels* Bess's overload. And--well--I hope you're right about Bess and the chip. Because if not--"

"She's our daughter and your granddaughter, no matter what." He didn't want to think about what Diana might be suggesting.

"Understood. Give my regards to Melanie and Bess." Diana turned and walked out of the family room. Marty gulped down the rest of his coffee and took three deep breaths. Then he left the room, heading for their suite.

Today was going to be one hell of a long day.

#

Meet me @20:00 in Wing A conservatory. Time we talked. M.

Alex Jeffreys frowned at the text from Do It Right International president Melanie Fielding. *Time we talked* could mean a lot of things, and not necessarily what he hoped. Ever since Bess Fielding had been called off of station management at DIR 3 to assume her role as North American DIR president and manager of the Netwalker Sarah Stephens, he'd been waiting to hear what would happen next. Because of his past role in helping Bess recover from sensory overloads before she got her chip, he'd expected to have a position working at her side for the rest of their lives. Bess had expected that, too. They'd--pretty much planned a future around those certainties.

But when Bess became a Netwalk host, the rules suddenly changed in ways that no one had bothered to tell the two of them before. Sarah was a primary Netwalk predator, and no one was certain of how well the transition from her first host to Bess would go. This was the first transfer of Netwalker from host to host, which made the situation more delicate. And since Alex carried a Netwalk chip himself, in preparation for hosting the digital personality of Do It Right's black ops manager Nik Morley when he died, the powers that governed Netwalk placement overruled what he and Bess had assumed would always be the case. He was potentially attractive to Sarah, and given that his father Liam was tied up in weird Gizmo links even after he should have been dead as a Netwalker, that made Alex a risk to both Bess and Sarah.

No contact for a year. It still felt funny not to have Bess nearby. He and Bess hadn't talked much about their virtual and physical linkage, but he had depended on the contact between them as much as she did. Bess kept Alex connected to a world where he wasn't just a virtual--and sometimes real--assassin. This past year away from her, he'd found himself detaching from people more than he liked--if it hadn't been for Don and Sophie, he'd be further isolated.

You'll have to watch out for that, Nik had warned him. *Ange and Sophie kept me connected and centered. But you'll still have those shadow nights. When you start having nights without the shadows haunting your dreams and you're not in a relationship--you're getting too calloused.*

He'd had fewer nightmares lately. Being alone was starting to feel good.

Not a good sign.

But maybe now they'd let him be around Bess again. Then that feeling would change.

Don't count on that possibility. Focus on what's happening now. Pragmatic realities. But part of him still hoped.

Right now he had to hustle. He had just enough time to make his way across DIR 3 to Wing A. If he took a couple of shortcuts, he might be able to get there first, before Melanie. Alex acted instinctively, ducking into the first maintenance corridor he came to. Besides, he needed the practice. Better to stay familiar with what the air and textures of the hidden corridors and air ducts felt and smelled like when there wasn't an emergency. Remaining sensitive to those changes was especially important in a space station, where he might have to make his way in darkness, changed gravity, or vacuum. Plus he was an independent check on station viability. *If the maintenance corridors smell clear and test clean, the station's clean,* was one of Bess's aphorisms, learned under Jennie Spenser at Tranquility Base.

After serving as Security under other station managers, he had to appreciate Bess's approach more than ever.

Alex slipped into the Wing A conservatory at 19:53. A quick blink scan showed him that Melanie was already there, waiting on the far side.

<Taking the short way to try to beat me to a meeting again, I see,> she subvocalized.

<It's what I do.> Rather than take the regular paths, he glided into the hidden routes he'd crafted through the forest. Wing A was a Pacific Northwest rain forest, running through a wet winter cycle. *Just like home*. Except this was home now.

The path he chose took him right to Melanie's bench. She smiled as he twisted under the leafless elderberry bush and stood up on the main trail, brushing a few twigs off of his uniform. "You've always liked playing in the brush."

"I have, haven't I?" He sat on the other end of the bench, feet down flat, weight mostly on them, not fully relaxing.

She mirrored his position, sitting up and shaking his head. "Yes, and Bess went in right after you. The two of you were worse on snow."

"Yeah." He stared ahead. No use delaying, he was going to have to ask. "How is she doing with--her?"

"Bess and Sarah appear to be getting along quite well as host and Netwalker, thank you." Melanie looked away from him, then looked back. "Better than Sarah did with Diana. Now that we've got that fixed, it's time to get you back to Bess's side. Gizmo is stirring again. And from what Sarah is telling Bess--this could be a monster coming at us."

"A monster? Like what?"

"Like multiple copies of Gizmo descending on this planet to create more Disruptions," Melanie said. "We think it may be a possibility." She hesitated, and he could tell from the way she chewed on her lip that something more concerned her. Chewing her lip was one of Melanie's tells.

"What else?"

Melanie startled. "What--yeah. You notice things. You've always noticed things. Okay. What else? The 'what else' is that the remnant of your father appears to be part and parcel of what is going on. Given that you and Don seem to be the best at keeping him under control and out of things--who better to be at Bess's side?"

"Is this a DIR 1 situation?" Bess's first month as a station manager had been marked by an attack by Gizmo-driven bots on DIR 1. Melanie had reacted by sending Bess all of her crèche-kin as support staff. It'd been a good crisis solution simply because of the links they'd evolved over the years of working and training together--but all of them had other primary assignments that ranked as a higher priority than keeping their crèche cohort together after training. It took extraordinary events like the DIR 1 bot attack to bring them together for long.

"It's worse than that," Melanie said. "The last one was a localized bot. This one--" she swallowed hard. "This one, there appears to be a flotilla of *something* headed this way. No idea of size or numbers yet. The High Space Coalition is gearing up for defenses, and that includes Netwalkers. You, Bess, Don and Sophie are some of DIR's best operatives and managers in space settings. It makes sense to have you lead our part of the space defense against--whatever this is."

"How reliable is this information?"

Melanie grimaced. "If I had a more definite indicator of potential danger, it'd be easier to set up a coordinated world-wide defense system. That's going to be part of your job, to get that data together and put together in a nice little sales package. If we have the time."

Alex nodded. *That explains Don and Sophie*. "Any other crèche-kin to be part of this operation? Phil Jansen would be a good compliment to Don and Sophie for preparing our propaganda."

Melanie winced at his use of the word *propaganda*.

Alex continued before she could speak an objection. "And she's not crèche-kin, but Jennie Spencer as daily ops manager for Bess so she can focus on tracking down that flotilla and coordinating project response would be a good assignment. If Jennie will come out of retirement, that is."

"I've already talked to her about it," Melanie said. "And as for Phil and his *propaganda*--" Her stress of the word carried a wry twist, "well, as soon as I can do the behind-the-scenes negotiation to get him off of Tranquility Base without attracting too much attention, he'll be part of the team. Not sure about the others from DIR. I can try to get Chris from Stephens. I haven't talked to Andrew

about releasing her to us yet but I know my brother is not happy with the initial reaction to this information in the Courts. But Chris isn't freelance, and Andrew has her assigned to a high-level project at the moment."

"I hope we can get her. She runs excellent com linkages that can't be beat."

"Which is why Andrew is trying to get her extracted and contracted to us on special assignment. But he has to dance around Richard because the project's his baby, and he wants his sister on it bad. We have to be careful because Andrew and Richard don't see eye-to-eye at all on anything related to Gizmo. Chris agrees with their father, which means Richard's especially touchy about Andrew pulling her off of his pet project."

"Richard's bought into Gizmo's worldview wholesale," Alex agreed. "But can't your brother dump him out of the company?"

Melanie shook his head. "That's the devil's bargain Andrew made to stay in the Corporate Courts. Richard as primary link to the Courts. However, our plan may be sufficiently attractive to Richard that he'll ignore the Gizmo elements and put Chris on the team just so Stephens Rec has a hand in the goings-on."

"So what's the timeline? Where do we go from here?"

"Bess is still Earthside, as are Don and Sophie. We'll go down to meet up and do the big briefing. Then we ship you all up, to High Space One."

"High Space One? The near-earth asteroid station?"

"None other." Melanie gave him a sideways look and a half-smile. "Ever wanted to break in a new station? Now's your chance."

High Space One. The High Space Alliance's first group station in lunar orbit, based on a near-earth asteroid further out than any human had been before, using an old plan from NASA. "We're the shakedown staff?"

"None other. Which is why we should be able to get Chris from Stephens."

"Does Bess know about the details of this assignment yet?" He didn't think so, at the very least she'd had slipped him a slow text if she knew, slow to comply with her own restrictions, but enough to share a private glee.

"She suspects. But I needed to get things settled here first and confirm your assignments before I could send you down."

Space. A thrill ran through him. And space with Bess.

"Don't grin so hard," Melanie said. "It took serious negotiation to put even these little pieces of my dream team together." But she was still smiling wryly. Then her face turned serious. "Just keep in mind that we're dealing with Gizmo. And when it comes to Gizmo, what you see isn't what you'll get."

"I know. But still--gotta admit, this is an exciting prospect."

Melanie half-smiled again. "I can just imagine what it's going to look like once you kids get rolling. I'm jealous. But somebody has to hold things together Earthside." She stood. "We leave for Earth in two hours. Enough time for you to get your gear prepped for shipment?"

"I can do it in less than an hour."

"Nik's trained you well." She came over to Alex and reached up to gently pull his head down while she stood on her tiptoes to kiss his cheeks, something she hadn't done since he was a teen. "Take care of my girl, Alex. Sometimes she's too much like me when she gets on the trail of a challenge. Keep her safe. Please. You can when no one else is able."

"I'll keep her safe," he promised.

"More may ride on this you think." Melanie sighed and dropped back down flatfooted. "See you in two hours."

"Two hours." He watched Melanie leave. Then, carefully, he headed back through the forest taking a different path which led him to a hidden maintenance corridor that let out closer to his quarters.

Breaking in a new station, with Bess and the others.

High stakes involved if they had a flotilla of Gizmos coming at them. But still, he couldn't help but grin.

This had been the situation they'd spent their lives training for. He knew it, deep in his bones.

And we'll solve it. No question.

Back at his quarters, Alex grabbed an old purple vinyl stuff sack that had been amongst the items Bess had left behind after her reassignment to Earth. It was just part of a small collection of things she'd told him to bring down the next time they met.

No more exile.

And that felt good.

THE END

Author's Notes:

So hello, with these three little vignettes I've managed to put together some planning pieces for both NETWALK'S CHILDREN and NETWALKING SPACE. I love it when a cunning plan actually works! Now I have to plot and write those books.

When I first started writing these Netwalk stories back in the 90s, Sarah and Andrew were completely bad news, irredeemable. However, what fun is that? Interestingly, while Sarah and Andrew are becoming more positive characters, Diana is edging into difficult territory. Hers is more the story of someone who started out with good intentions, but over the years her actions shifted until what she does no longer fits what she once believed. At first, when I wrote Diana going completely bad in NETWALKING MARS (what will now be NETWALKING SPACE), I attributed it to outside control (non-Gizmo, as Gizmo didn't exist in that world yet). Then I decided that it was living with a contradiction in her head that twisted Diana, because Diana ultimately is not comfortable with the concept of Netwalk and personalities continuing to exist after their bodies die. That affects her relationships with both Sarah and Will as Netwalkers.

Furthermore, as I worked on NETWALKER UPRISING, I realized that Diana, like her mother Sarah, is a politician at heart. She didn't start out that way (unlike Sarah, for whom the rough and tumble of political life dominated most of her existence, both in the flesh and as a Netwalker). Was it Sarah's influence over thirty-some years as joined Netwalker and host, or Diana's own tendencies? As this take shows, I explored Diana's shadow side a bit more with these story segments. But all Sarah's descendants have a love-hate relationship with politics. Some just engage with politics more than their other relatives.

Melanie and Bess are not politicians and never really become engaged in politics outside of corporate life. Another difference is that while Diana and Sarah would and did sacrifice their children to some degree to attain their goals, Melanie made a different choice in NETWALKER UPRISING and Bess probably will as well, because she is more like her mother than her grandmother or great-grandmother. Sarah and Diana have a dynastic view of the family influences in Do It Right and Stephens Reclamation, while Melanie and Bess are more concerned with making things work right and keeping those they love safe. The question then becomes, which perspective ends up dominating in the long run? That's a card I'm going to have to palm for now.

This time around I wrote the stories from the male perspective. This was part of the plan all along (after all, at some point the boyfriends/beloveds interact with the mothers of those they love!). I've written both Marty's and Alex's voices in past stories, but getting into Will's head took some time and careful thought. He really is one of my favorite fun minor characters, whether in Netwalker form, where he indulges his love of snowboarding and poking fun at himself as a wise sage by appearing as a Buddhist monk; or in his physical form, where he is active and designing new electronic devices up until his death, even as cancer debilitates him and begins to take him down (and yes, he is killed by Sarah in NETWALK). I had to find a voice that remained true to Will's whimsical nature but still could be serious and detailed. He mourns the loss of contact with Diana, because she struggles with the concept of his virtual existence. He regrets that she refuses the prospect of joining him as a Netwalker.

Marty is--Marty. He is Melanie's rock, her support and base, her lover and lodestar in a world that changes quickly. Even when I first wrote him back in the 90s he was this way, slow to anger, except when his family is threatened. Like Will, he's a research geek, and one thing that has changed during Will's transition to Netwalker status is that when Will's host is close enough for good virtual contact, Will and Marty get together to brainstorm cool new tech toys. They're both makers and creators, and when the two of them get together on a project...watch out! The results are not likely to be what you expect.

Even though I'm familiar with Alex's voice, he told me in this story that he needs Bess as much as Bess needs him. I'd been edging toward that realization in other short stories, but this story is the first time he flat out expresses that need. Alex is a reluctant assassin, but he has that cold hard side that does what is needed when it is needed. The shadow of his father pokes at him on a regular basis, and it's only the experience he gained from years of buffering Bess from Gizmo that helps him throw off Liam's influence. That and the

attentive rearing within Do It Right, where he and his brother Don were pretty much raised as members of the family by Marty, Melanie, Nik and Angela, at least when they were not actively engaged with their crèche cohort--which that also is something new that popped up when writing this particular segment.

Nik Morley, however, has much more influence on Alex than Marty. And it is Nik who teaches Alex how to deal with Liam's shadow in his life. Security is Alex's life and Alex's choice. Alex's virtual avatar is based on variants of Michael the Archangel images, and he often visualizes himself as Bess's Archangel when in virtual. He is Bess's defender and will be Bess's defender as long as he is able.

Published books and short stories

Netwalker Sequence titles currently available:

Netwalk

Tranquility Freeriders

Coming Soon:

Netwalk: Expanded Edition (2013)

Netwalk Foundations: Problems at the Andrews Ranch (2013)

Netwalk's Children (2013-2014)

Netwalking Space (2014)

Short stories and other pieces related to the Netwalk Sequence can be found on Peak Amygdala at <http://www.joycereynoldsward.com>. Regular bimonthly short stories and world-building vignettes can be found for free as part of the Netwalk Foundations section of Peak Amygdala.

About the Author

Besides writing, Joyce Reynolds-Ward is a skier, horsewoman, and special education teacher who lives in Portland, Oregon with her husband and son. Other recently published works include "Beer Goes to War" in *How Beer Saved the World*, "River-Kissed" in EPIC anthology finalist *River*, as well as publication in *Gears and Levers 1*, *Gobshite Quarterly*, *White Cat*, *Nightbird Singing in the Dead of Night*, and other publications.

Inquiries about graphic novel or game development are encouraged and should be directed to Joyce through her website.

