

NETWALK

**FOUNDATIONS:
LUCIFER HAS FALLEN**



JOYCE REYNOLDS-WARD

NETWALK FOUNDATIONS: LUCIFER HAS FALLEN

by

Joyce Reynolds-Ward

This is a work of fiction. All characters and events portrayed in this book are fictitious, and any resemblance to real people is purely coincidental.

Lucifer Has Fallen and Netwalk Foundations © 2013 by Joyce Reynolds-Ward. All Rights Reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews. Distribution is handled by the author, and all requests for redistribution should be pointed to the author.

First Edition: September 2013

Layout and Cover by Samuel Ward

Contents

LUCIFER HAS FALLEN

Author's notes

Published books and short stories

About the Author

LUCIFER HAS FALLEN

"And I saw Lucifer fall from heaven. How you have fallen, oh Day Star, son of Dawn--" Francis Stewart gestured wildly with his full goblet of pinot noir. It sloshed over his hand as his burgundy-colored velour robe fell open to reveal the sparse mix of gray and black hair on his narrow chest. "Damn it. Waste of good wine. Fix that." He gulped down about a quarter of the remaining wine in the goblet.

"Now *you're* quoting the Old Testament, and not doing it well either," Sarah Stephens groaned, rattling the ice in her Scotch as she sprawled in her chair, feeling the ache in her joints in spite of the anti-aging nanos. *Time for a new loading dose.* "Francis, you're getting tiresome and repetitive, and worse yet, you're starting to sound like those Freedom Army yahoos." She played with slipping her feet in and out of her flats, left foot, right foot, right foot, left foot. The exercise was good for her sore foot. "What do those verses from the Bible have to do with anything, anyway?"

"You should know these things." Stewart smirked at Sarah as he dropped into a heavy armchair next to his bed. "Wisdom can be found in the strangest places." He grabbed for the wine bottle on the round Mission-style oak side table and topped off his glass, his robe seeming to blend in with the matching shade of the heavy window drapes behind him.

Sarah snorted, eyeing the level in the wine bottle and wondering if she even wanted to make the effort to stay. *Get no sense from Francis tonight. Must have been one hell of a board meeting for Freedom Enterprises this afternoon. He's got the biggest mess of wannabe activists on that board that I've ever seen. Wouldn't let any of them within miles of Stephens Rec.* "If I wanted Bible quotes I'd go visit family in Neahcom. And I probably know *these things* better than you. The right quote is "How you are fallen from heaven, O Day Star, son of Dawn! How you are cut down to the ground, you who laid the nations low! Isaiah 14:12. If you're going to talk apocalypse, get it right."

"Not what I'm talking about." Francis threw a lanky leg over one leg of the chair and gulped down more wine. "Not one whit. Not religion."

"Even so, you need to get your quotes correct." Sarah's voice sharpened and she sipped on her whisky, savoring the smoky flavor of the single malt modulated by the ice cube. "Usually when I start hearing these rants it's all about the End Times and Jesus coming back in fire. Just what the hell else could you be talking about?"

"What if the Biblical accounts described something real?" Francis arched his brow and drank.

Sarah looked at her drink. "Fine. What is going on? Is this a drinking game or something, Francis? Like I said, you're sounding like the Freedom Army. Cut it out. You're smarter than that." She sipped her Scotch.

"Come on, Sarah. What if the Freedom Army's right about some things?" Francis put his goblet down carefully, his words coming clearer and sharper. "You're usually good at considering extreme possibilities, and these Disruptions do have a Biblical element."

How can he say something so outrageous and sound so damn sober when I've seen him suck down damned near half a bottle of good wine? She hadn't seen the label but the wine would be good. Francis did have taste in some matters.

"Define extreme possibilities." Her voice sharpened. "Francis, really. I've had too damn many people yelling at me about stupid Disruption bullshit in meetings today. If that's what you're talking about--"

"That's *exactly* what I'm talking about. Aren't you worried about these Disruptions?"

"What the hell do you think when whatever these attacks are hit so fast that the disruption of service messages are our first warning of what happens?" Sarah took another sip of her whisky. "Damn it, Francis, we don't have time to chase after End Times delusions. Whatever is causing these Disruptions could strike anywhere. You aren't going to find the answers in the Bible!"

Francis picked up his goblet and stared into it. "These attacks aren't naturally caused."

"Of course not! Someone's behind them."

"What if it's something supernatural?"

"Ah Jesus, Francis, are you on *that* bandwagon? Did you join the crazies?" Irrational anger flooded through Sarah. "I go back to Oregon for six months to take care of business and you turn fundie politico on me? Damn it, I expected *you* to be one of the fucking sane ones!" She tossed the rest of her Scotch back in one neat swallow and slammed her glass down on the table. "I'll see you in the morning." Anger propelled her out of her seat, motivated her to firmly shove her swollen and tired feet into her shoes and pointed her toward the door.

Francis leapt from his chair and grabbed her wrist. "Sarah, you need to listen to this, damnit. I'm drunk because--because--*Lucifer has fallen and we're all going to pay.*" He wobbled slightly and she could see the drink starting to take him.

"You're drunk and listening to stupid paranoid conspiracy theorists," Sarah hissed, pulling her wrist free. She started to raise her hand to slap him but stopped herself. *Why am I so angry? He's just drunk and talking silly.*

Maybe it was the Neahcom memory trigger. Just about anything Neahcom-related irritated her, at the least. Neahcom and religion--worst of all.

"Ah Sarah. Don't be like that. Sarah." Francis snatched at her wrist again but this time she was quick enough to keep it from his grasp. "Listen. We're in big trouble."

"I know *you* are in trouble if you're listening to those people. I'll see you at breakfast." The irrational anger surged higher and she shook her head to try to clear it. *Get out of here. Now. Get away before you do something you regret.*

"Sarah." This time Francis was too quick for her and grabbed her shoulders. "You have to listen to me. Lucifer has fallen, *and it's not what you think it is.*"

Sarah wrenched away from Francis. *If he grabs me again I'll deck him.* Maybe it was time to end this on-again, off-again relationship. *When did I let him think he could just grab me like this?* The mistake she'd made with Jeff, all those years ago. Another Neahcom memory. *Will I ever be free of that goddamned place?*

"You're drunk and delusional, Francis, and what you're saying doesn't match that quote. That's a quote about the doom of Nebuchadnezzar."

"Isn't it about Satan?"

Sarah sighed. "Francis, you're a novice at this proof-texting game. I grew up on it. Look. We'll talk in the morning." She opened the door.

"Sarah. Please."

Despite herself she turned to look at Francis, damning herself for her weakness. "I'm tired, Francis, and we've got a busy day tomorrow."

"Sarah." He stood tall, holding his hands wide and open, making a pitiable face. She almost turned back.

"In the morning, Francis," she said softly. "At breakfast. Usual place and time."

"Lucifer has fallen, Sarah," he whispered. "*Lucifer has fallen, and it's not what we think.* I hope you listen to me before it's too late."

Sarah sighed. "Go to bed, Francis. We'll talk in the morning."

"If it's not too late by then," he said."

Something about the way he said it chilled her blood.

Just not enough for her to turn back when he'd had too much to drink and was ranting about things that triggered her memories of Neahcom.

Learned my lesson about that one years ago.

#

"Didn't expect you to stay here tonight." Anne Whitman looked up from the tablet in her lap as Sarah let herself into the condo they were sharing for the Third Force International Congress, Anne as a government representative and Sarah as a business representative.

"Francis may be sucking down the pinot, but he sure sounds like he's been drinking something stronger," Sarah grumbled as she headed for the bar. "Not worth staying, especially when he starts blathering." She fumbled for the bottle of twenty-five-year-old Macallen and poured herself a tumbler full almost to the brim. She debated about adding an ice cube, then decided to err on the side of caution and plunked one in.

When she turned, Anne whistled softly. "You're hitting it hard tonight."

Sarah snorted. "Nothing like Francis. He'd had a snootful before I got there."

"That's not been uncommon for him over the past few months." Anne raised a brow at Sarah.

“What the hell happened? You all right? You look pissed. Usually you put up with the crap he spews when he gets drunk. Not get pissed about it.”

“I’ll be fine, it’s probably just been a case of not being around him lately.” Sarah took a taste of the Macallen. *Not meant to be gulped*, she reminded herself. No matter what her mood was. “I’ve been thinking it’s time to end that aspect of the relationship for good,” she said, trying the sound of the idea. It didn’t hurt but she didn’t expect it to hurt. Not with the shape her relationship with Francis had taken over the years. Off-again, on-again, in and out of each other’s beds--but tonight’s antics not only wearied Sarah, they angered her, more than she had expected. *Flashbacks to childhood, I suppose*. The puzzling anger was receding. *I hate the power those memories have over my reactions. Unpredictable as hell. I should be past that.*

Anne’s other eyebrow arched. “You *are* pissed at him.”

“I’m feeling like turning over a new leaf.” Sarah kicked off her flats and sipped the Scotch cautiously, sucking it down to a safe, non-spilling level before she eased into the deep armchair across from Anne and put her feet up on the soft ottoman. “Anne, he was switching between drunk and sober literally between one word and another. It was--spooky.” *And too much like my adoptive father*, Sarah realized. Maybe that was what had set her temper off. Tom Cunningham had been a drunk like Francis Stewart, and she’d been his verbal target as a child. Bewildering, before she’d learned she was adopted. Even more understandable once she discovered who her mother was and why she’d been put up for adoption instead of raised as a Stephens. *Explains a lot--except I don’t know how much he really knew about who my parents were*. She pressed her lips together firmly. No need to go chasing down that hall of mirrors. *Damn you, Francis, you would evoke that pit of vipers!*

Anne put the tablet aside and sat up. “You’re not the only one to notice that. Sarah, Bolgorev pulled me aside this afternoon between hearings to ask me if Francis is always this disjointed.”

“Yeah. I know.” Sarah let herself ease down even more into the chair’s softness. “I’m hearing it from the business side. Been getting cryptic messages about his behavior for the past two weeks.” She stared down into her drink, swirling the ice cube around. “But I’ve not seen it directly myself and I thought it was just Francis being quixotic. He does that, you know. And then. Tonight. Damn it, Anne, he started spouting Bible verses at me, before he went raving off on how Lucifer has fallen. *Lucifer has fallen*. That’s what he said. Lucifer has fallen.”

“That’s worse than I’d heard.” Anne got up and padded over to the bar. “I didn’t figure him for a religious drunk. God. How obnoxious. What are you going to do?”

Sarah allowed herself a bigger swallow of whisky. “Tonight? Finish this drink and go to bed. Tomorrow? Review my options and start damage control.” She flung her head against the chair’s back, staring up at the bland white ceiling. “I so did not need this. Not at the beginning of the session. With these Disruptions, it was already going to be bad enough. It will be until we ID what the cause is. But

with Francis going off-the-deep-end irrational on us? It's going to be a long, long six months."

"I was somewhat hoping you'd pull an intervention to bring him back to reality." Anne sat back down, a glass of wine in her hand.

"There are times when someone's just too far gone."

"We need him--sane and reasonable--in the coalition, Sarah."

"I can pull us some business votes to offset Francis," Sarah said, but she didn't even sound convincing to her own ears.

"Locked down? Committed? Tomorrow?"

Sarah sighed. "I just got here today. I'm not necessarily a miracle worker. But I can get them."

Anne shook her head. "Not if Francis scares them off with his talk, like he's doing. Sarah, I needed you here a week ago."

"I had other matters to handle." Sarah took another swallow of the Macallen. "A business to run. Trying to cut a deal with my daughter's company. God, she's tough."

Anne snorted. "Who do you think Diana learned that from, Sarah? I've negotiated with Diana; it's like negotiating with you. She's as tough if not tougher. Look, I need you to fix Francis or shut him up at least long enough for us to get through the Coalition vote. Will you do that for me?"

Sarah glared at Anne, then committed sacrilege and gulped her drink. Her third swallow emptied the glass and she held it up. "Fill this, damn it."

Anne smiled. "Thank you, dearest." She got up and brought the bottle back, refilling the glass and leaving the bottle on a side table within Sarah's reach. "Welcome back to Washington. About freaking time you got your butt out of Portland."

"With a reception like this I'm ready to head back," Sarah grumbled as she took the glass from Anne, staring into her drink. Getting Francis off of one of his obsessions was going to be a real pain. Doable, yes. Pleasant, no. The prospect made her tired just thinking about it. He'd settle down if she spent some time with him, heard him out and shot holes in his rantings. She could have probably done so tonight and gotten that chore out of the way if he hadn't already gone through so much wine--and if he hadn't triggered her memories of Tom Cunningham--she refused to think of Cunningham--of anyone--as father.

I am so fucking tired of being Francis's babysitter. But we still need his support in the Coalition.

Anne cupped Sarah's cheek in her hand, then squeezed her shoulder. "Don't stay up too late drinking tonight, darling. I promise I won't spout off Bible verses at you."

Sarah smiled up at Anne. "I appreciate the thought, dear. But you deserve better than being second-best for the night, and I'm afraid that right now I'm not fit company for anyone I really care about." Her smile faded and she sighed. "But I'll finish this one, maybe half a glass more, then go to bed. The ghosts won't haunt me then."

"I wouldn't think of it as being about second-best for the night." Anne's fingertips traced up Sarah's neck and along her chin, stroking her lips. "I know what the rules are. And I'll take care of the ghosts."

Sarah closed her eyes, savoring the pleasant tingle of Anne's light touch on her lips for a moment, now only realizing how deeply she'd bitten into them at Francis's condo. Then she reached up and gently took Anne's hand.

"No," she said softly. "Not tonight. Francis triggered Neahcom memories. I meant it when I said I'm not fit company, and besides--" she hesitated. "I need to think more on what and how Francis talked if you're going to have me run an intervention. Despite the sound of it, I don't think he was quoting the Bible after all. And if he's not--Anne, I need time to think."

"Understood. Especially if he's bringing up Neahcom memories." Anne sighed. "I know what that means to you. But the offer still stands."

"Thank you." Sarah carefully set her drink down on the glass side table.

"Get some rest," Anne breathed before kissing Sarah's lips gently. And then she was gone.

Sarah stared at the bookcase behind Anne's chair for a few minutes, frowning. *Where else have I read that phrase--not Biblical?*

A niggling suspicion pulled at her brain. It *had* been a while since she'd read the book she thought it had come from. She pushed herself up to retrieve Anne's discarded tablet and ran a search, muttering as she excluded Bible commentaries and Satanic references.

At last she found the reference that had been whispering around the edges of her memory. *A Canticle for Leibowitz*. She quirked her lips worriedly at the title, remembering its subject well even though she hadn't read the book itself for years, back when she was still young and idealistic. Sarah brought the book reference up quickly and skimmed until she found the passage. Reread it not once, but several times, her frown growing with each reread. At last she put the tablet down and sipped on her drink, staring unfocused as worry snaked through her stomach.

Nukes? No, that was only the prevalent issue of the 1960s. The Disruptions don't use nuclear components.

But they could bring about the end of civilization as we know it if we don't get a handle on how and why they're happening. Just like the nukes could have.

Lucifer has fallen. What the hell does Francis mean by this? A weapon--but whose weapon is it?

A further memory inserted itself into her thoughts. Francis had said he was drinking because "Lucifer has fallen and we're all going to pay." *Whatever he knows, he's afraid of it.*

Sarah finished her drink and, as she'd promised Anne, only partially refilled her glass.

Francis doesn't spook easily. If the Disruptions are caused by a weapon and he knows enough about it to get smashed because he's afraid of it--then God, what the hell are we getting into?

Maybe she had left too soon, triggered by the Biblical nature of Francis's rants and her own dark

childhood. Those memories didn't always grab her like this, but in retrospect and after the Macallen, she wasn't now surprised by her sudden, knee-jerk anger. The mark of Neahcom still lingered under the sophisticated façade she'd created when she'd left that Oregon coastal town for good.

Maybe she should have tried to pump Francis for more information. No, as drunk and defensive as he had been, he'd have continued to be coy and evasive until he passed out.

She considered Anne's offer and rejected the prospect for tonight.

Some demons were best confronted alone.

#

Francis didn't appear for the daily breakfast appointment that they normally kept at Roses when they were both in town during Third Force sessions. Sarah wasn't unduly surprised when she entered the little breakfast café near their condo and Francis wasn't there yet. Disappointed, perhaps, but not surprised. He was probably sleeping off his epic drunk and would swoop into either a hearing or her office at some point, laden with flowers and apologies.

On the other hand, he could come bouncing in late, looking like he'd not touched a drop the night before. Nonetheless, given the state of her sleep last night, she could use breakfast quiet. Francis required a lot of attention and energy first thing in the morning, and this was most definitely not an energetic morning. Sarah left her com glasses on the table, set only on high emergency notification. She sipped on her jasmine tea and slowly poked at the granola and yogurt mixture in her bowl, taking her time, focusing on the moment, deliberately *not* thinking about Lucifer, weapons, or Disruptions, damping down the news screen at her table to its lowest volume level. She focused on the lavender-colored silk rose on her table. Lavender roses were safe. The only man in her life who'd given her lavender roses was Dan Andrews, her daughter Diana's father.

This morning she could feel regret for the choices she'd made that had led her away from Dan. He had been a good man.

But it wouldn't have worked for you to stay with him, the despair that accompanied the memories from those days reminded her.

Sarah sighed. Not even memories of Dan Andrews were safe this morning.

A blast of noise followed by flashing red text brought her focus back to the screen. Sarah scowled at the screen then, as images of people collapsing in the street began to scroll across it, tapped up the sound. Her glasses vibrated with the silenced high emergency warning and she snatched them before they quivered off of the table.

"Another Disruption in Brisbane."

Sarah winced and shut down the sounds of people screaming behind the announcer's voice. The visuals were bad enough. Her stomach roiled and she shut off the screen, waving for a server as she fumbled with her glasses to turn them on.

Urgent Council meeting. All Executive Council members report in fifteen minutes. Urgent Council meeting. The message flashed in bright red until she tapped acknowledgement.

Her stomach clenched tight. *Auto-report. Oh God, are we next?* Sarah flipped the com settings to full access as she settled the glasses on her face. She scanned the flashing links in the glass, looking for Francis's acknowledgement sigil. Nothing.

Her usual server Jenny came over, face pale and sick-looking. "You saw?"

"Yeah. Gotta go. Bill to my account?"

"Got it." Jenny shook her head. "My brother's there. In Brisbane."

"I'm sorry," was all Sarah could find to say. Already her mind was wildly spinning ahead.

Lucifer. Lucifer is whatever's causing these damn Disruptions, and Francis knows something about just what the hell it is. I am going to find Francis and pound that information out of his head if he won't tell me up front!

As she left Roses she tapped up Francis's quick link on her glass.

Nothing.

Where the hell are you, Francis? Or are you so passed out you didn't answer the phone? Her steps slowed as she reached the place where she had to choose whether she'd turn left for Francis's condo or right for hers. He had to come to this meeting as well. Maybe she could kick him out of bed, get his lazy ass over there.

Incoming call flashed on her glass. Anne.

"You saw?" Anne asked.

"Enough to make me glad I'd finished eating."

"What does Francis say?"

Sarah hesitated, unsure which way to go. "He wasn't there, Anne, and he didn't answer my call."

"Christ. Sarah, we need you to get to the Council. Pronto." There was a quaver in Anne's voice. "We need to find biobots to hunt this thing down."

"This--*thing*?" She headed for their condo at her fastest walk, unwilling to run. Not in a humid D.C. springtime.

"They've identified a potential cause," Anne said flatly. "There's pix. You should be able to see them on your glass."

"Haven't looked yet. Still walking. I'm at the condo. We'll go over together." Sarah palmed the door open and clicked off her glasses, pushing them up on her head. She darted past Anne in the kitchen and rushed to her own office to pick up her tablet in its sleeve, quickly checking inside to make sure she had everything she needed.

Anne waited by the door. "I've looked at the pix. Sarah, it's a machine of some sort."

"A war machine?" *Who the hell--not anyone I would know of. I don't think. All those machines are accounted for, unless Parker Landreth had something get away from him.*

"War machine is the closest description of what it could be. Doesn't quite look like anything I've seen before."

"What about Francis? Should we get him up and going?"

"God, Sarah, I don't think we have the time, and if he's in the shape you said he was in last night--"

They slid out the door, hurrying back toward the street and to the waiting skimcab. Sarah noticed that one also waited for Francis as she pulled her glasses back down and turned them on.

"He'll have to come when he can," she decided. Nonetheless, she texted him a quick message.

Get your butt to the Council ASAP. Whatever bullshit you were talking about last night, park it. We've got bigger issues to deal with.

Their skimcab took off, headed for the Council offices in what had once been the Pentagon. Sarah leaned back against the seat, only now allowing herself to study the images from Brisbane in her glass.

But she could still hear Francis's voice echoing in her head as she watched the raw footage of a blurry machine floating above the areas where people collapsed, dying. *Lucifer has fallen.*

Just what the hell *was* this machine able of creating these Disruptions?

Who's capable of building such a thing? She ran down the list of companies she knew that produced such equipment. None of them had any such items currently in production--and production of war machines was strictly regulated by the Third Force. And Parker Landreth's brilliant, snowboarding, eerily competent son William, the one person who could have put something like this together for Landreth, was gone from Landreth Technologies.

I need William's help.

But he was her son-in-law, and right now they weren't on the best of terms.

Nonetheless, William was at Do It Right, Diana's company, and not at Landreth Tech.

Need more data before I talk to them. Still, she was grateful William and Diana were married and that William was with Do It Right and not Landreth Tech right now. If anyone could figure out what this thing was, it would be William.

"Have you talked to Will and Diana yet?" Anne asked, echoing Sarah's thoughts.

Sarah shook her head. "They're both in the Amazon right now. I want to find out more before I talk to them. William might be just who we need to go after whatever this is."

"Diana did a good thing marrying Will. Even though I know you didn't approve."

"It was Parker Landreth I didn't approve of more than William," Sarah sighed. "I still don't like that aspect, even though he's cut off all ties to William."

"Maybe you should relax and call him Will like the rest of us," Anne suggested, her voice soft.

"Maybe." Sarah tried pinging Francis again. "What the hell is he doing? I still can't reach Francis." Worry niggled at her. "I wonder what he meant by saying that it might be too late by the morning. What's his game? At the time I thought maybe he was guilt-tripping me. He does do that."

Anne grimaced. "I don't like the sounds of that. Even as drunk as you said he was, normally he'd at least respond to the alert."

"That's what I was thinking." Sarah frowned, then clicked up the Third Force Security link. *Check on Francis Stewart's whereabouts*, she texted. *Did not respond to my ping this am.*

The response was quicker than she expected. *All contact lost with Stewart. Security en route to his condo now.*

"Shit!"

"What?" Anne looked up from her tablet.

"Security's lost contact with Francis. He *never* switches off his tracer." Sarah started drumming her fingertips on her armrest. "They're headed for his condo now." She pulled her tablet out of its sleeve and began to scan the data flooding in from Brisbane to distract herself from the worry rising higher within her. After a few minutes, an incoming call flashed on her glass. Her son Peter, affiliated with Third Force Security.

"Peter."

"Mother, did you stay with Francis last night?"

"No. I was there until--Anne, when did I get back to the condo?"

"Eleven o'clock," Anne said, still focused on her tablet.

"I left his condo around ten fifty-five last night, then. He was drunk, very drunk. He didn't show up at breakfast this morning."

"He's not in his condo. No signs of a struggle."

"When did his tracer shut off?"

"Mother, you know I can't--"

"*When did his tracer shut off?*" Her voice cracked and she realized even more how suddenly and deeply afraid she was. "Peter, he said some wild stuff last night, connected to the Disruptions. And he was drinking heavily and hard. When I said we'd talk in the morning, he said it might be too late to talk then."

"That--puts a somewhat different light on the situation," Peter said. "I'll get back to you about his tracer, Mother. It appears that at some time last night, his Third Force tracer was masked by a short-term clone that imitated our tracer. So we're not sure yet just *when* the switch happened."

"Oh God," Sarah said, a sudden suspicion rising. She'd not thought about Freedom Enterprises as a source for that machine. But Francis's company had the capability to build such things--*and his*

damned board has exactly the collection of people that could be capable of contemplating doing just this! “Crap. Did you get a recording of our conversation?”

“Wiped.” The starkness of Peter’s tone told her that he was thinking the same things she was. “It’s not looking good for him.”

“No. And I don’t record when I’m with him alone because--well, that’s personal. Crap, crap, crap.”

“I’ll be in touch. Send us anything you can.”

“Memorializing what I remember of our conversation now.”

“Good. Later.”

Sarah pounded her fist on the armrest. “Damn it, Anne, it looks like Francis may be tied to this machine.”

“What?”

Sarah repeated what Peter had told her.

Anne shook her head. “Puts a different aspect on last night, doesn’t it?”

“It certainly does,” Sarah said, typing what she could recall of their conversation last night. She was almost finished when a file bearing Francis’s icon popped up on her glass.

“Something from Francis!” she told Anne. “A file.”

“Better let me look, too,” Anne advised. “Right now I think you need to protect yourself.”

Icy prickles crept up Sarah’s arms at that idea but Anne was completely right--at this point she needed to protect herself from whatever Francis had gotten himself into. She tapped up the skimcab’s big viewscreen and sent the file to it.

A recording.

Francis appeared on the screen, fully dressed in casual wear, the burgundy robe hanging loosely over his clothing. The wine goblet from last night still sat on the table beside him, as did the wine bottle, level not much different from what it had been when she left. The time stamp suggested he’d recorded this clip fifteen minutes later and just sent it. *So he’s all right.*

“Sarah. I’m sorry for this, but I told you this morning would be too late to talk.” He stopped to take a sip from the goblet. “By the time you get this, I’ll be out of North America. I would have told you, would have brought you along, but--” He shrugged. “You made a different choice.”

“Crap,” Sarah breathed, not doubting now.

“By now you’ll know that Lucifer has fallen again.” He cracked a brief, wry, smile. “By now you’ll also have figured out where I got that quote from. I know you. You went back to the condo and tracked down the reference.”

Sarah caught the quick glance Anne gave her and nodded.

Francis coughed. “My--*associates*--in the Freedom Army think they have a lock on the machine

causing the Disruptions. We're on our way now, to try to capture it. I've spent the last six months building a team in collaboration with them in order to make this happen."

A sick feeling oozed through Sarah's gut. *Oh no, this is not good. Something like this in the hands of those rebels is so not good.*

"He's cooperating with the Freedom Army?" Anne breathed. "Oh. My. God. That explains a lot."

"I imagine this means the last of our active relationship, but my suspicion is that after last night, it's gone anyway." Again, Francis smiled wryly and took another drink. "Give my regards to the Third Force. Maybe they'll figure things out--but not if I can get my hands on the device first. Sorry, but you had the opportunity. Goodbye."

"Damn it and damn him!" Sarah snarled as the clip ended.

"Would you have gone with him?" Anne asked.

"If only to figure out a way to keep those fanatics from turning that machine to their own uses, you bet." Sarah shook her head. "Anne, there's something different. *He's not afraid.* The man I talked to last night was *afraid*. This was recorded fifteen minutes later. What the hell happened?"

Anne shrugged. "Maybe what he was afraid of was you."

"He had damned well better be afraid of me now. If he'd even given me a hint, a solid hint to go on, I'd have joined in. But he didn't. He really didn't."

Or did he? Sarah rubbed her eyes and stared at her notes from the night before, which had taken on even more urgency.

No. No, he didn't.

"So what are you going to do?"

"Send this clip to Peter for one. He can pass it on to Security. Finish off my notes. Call Diana and William for help."

And hope to hell that the two of them are willing to join forces with us. She didn't think either her daughter or her son-in-law would hold grudges in this situation. Neither of them were like that.

But I can hold a grudge and I will. Francis, you're going to pay for this.

Even if it took the rest of her life to pull it off.

THE END

Author's notes:

Well, I didn't quite see THAT one coming until I wrote it! I did intend for Francis to betray Sarah at some point--that lays the foundation for the whole Netwalk Sequence stories (if you've read NETWALKER UPRISING, that connection becomes even more clear). This story diverges from the DAUGHTERS cycle in several ways about this particular incident, but I realized after I wrote it that that part of the DAUGHTERS cycle was not exactly canon, just because of the presence of Melanie and Andrew with Will and Diana in the Amazon. I'm still creating the necessary backstory around Gizmo...and yes, Lucifer is Gizmo.

Francis's betrayal in this incident is the motivator behind the creation of the Corporate Courts.

It's important to pay attention whenever Sarah thinks or talks about Neahcom. Not saying anything more than that.

Anne and Sarah are lovers, but not committed to each other--more friends with benefits. Sarah keeps Anne at arm's length because she values the other aspects of their relationship and fears losing them as she has lost everyone else she has ever loved. Nonetheless, male or female, it's not safe to be Sarah Stephens's lover--as Anne will find out at some point.

Published books and short stories

Netwalker Sequence titles currently available:

Netwalk: Expanded Edition

Tranquility Freeriders

Netwalker Uprising

Coming Soon:

Netwalk Foundations: The Daughters Cycle (2013)

Netwalk Foundations: Problems at the Andrews Ranch (2013)

Netwalk's Children (Winter 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. Her novels *Pledges of Honor* and *Seeking Shelter at the End of the World* will be coming out from eTreasures Publishing at a future date.

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