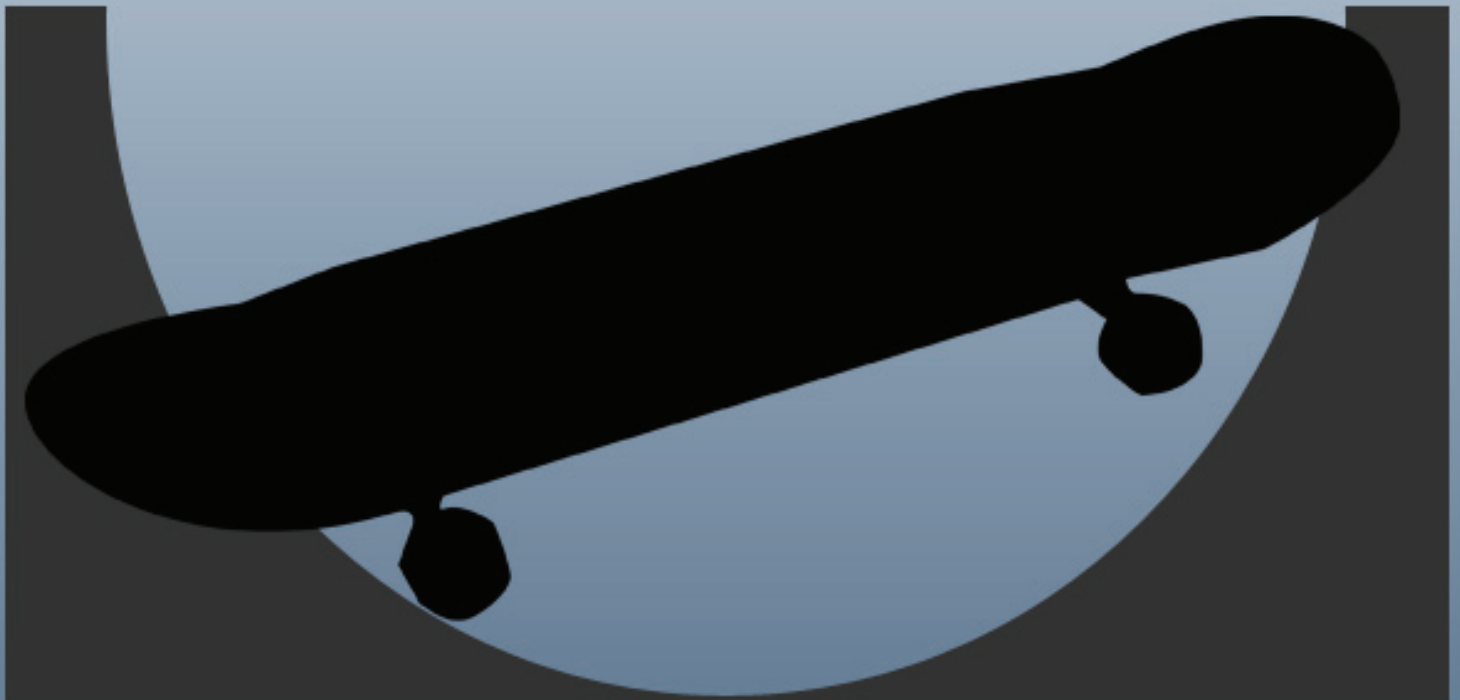


NETWALK

**FOUNDATIONS:
WHO PROTECTS THE PROTECTORS?**



JOYCE REYNOLDS-WARD

**NETWALK FOUNDATIONS:
WHO PROTECTS THE PROTECTORS**

by

Joyce Reynolds-Ward

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Contents

WHO PROTECTS THE PROTECTORS?

Author's notes:

Published books and short stories

About the Author

WHO PROTECTS THE PROTECTORS?

Where's Nik?

Empty bed next to her. Angela Garcia flung her right hand over to Nik's side of the bed. Barely warm. He'd been gone for a while.

Damn it. She pressed the heels of her hands into her eyes and drew in a deep, calming breath, trying to summon up enough energy to investigate further. Nik shouldn't be alone so soon after this last solo assignment. She needed to find him and make sure he wasn't sleepwalking or having flashbacks from his long virtual exposure. He'd pleaded fatigue to their usual post-mission debrief and decompression. She'd let it slide this time.

Obviously she shouldn't have.

Easy way first. She exhaled. <Nik?> she texted, subvocally through her Dialogue.

<Operative Nikolas Morley offline> came back in bright red flashing text through her overlays.

"Madre de Dios!" Angela snarled, slamming her right hand hard against the bed. *Damn it, he knows better!* SOP for a Nik solo post-mission meant he needed to keep in contact with her as his remote supervisor, which meant he *had* to keep his Dialogue on. Especially if he said he was too tired to debrief. *He was so damn sincere and solemn about it! Should have known better.*

A regular remote supervisor wouldn't have let him duck procedure, especially a tough job like this last one had been.

But Nik was different. Her Second in Do It Right Security. Her husband. She was the only one with clearance at Do It Right to supervise him on these Corporate Courts black op assignments. No way around it. Very rarely the titles blurred and the wife let things through that the Head of Security or a tough remote mission supervisor wouldn't. Tonight had been one of those rare nights, but, damn it, she had been tired too and Nik had been good about dealing with his post-mission white nights without going wandering the last two times.

Third time's the charm, not in a good way. I screwed up. Better go find the boy. See if there's any collateral damage. She didn't think things were *that* bad. Nik had the sense to wake her if he realized he was spiraling out of control, and he certainly wouldn't have had the presence of mind to shut down his Dialogue in that mental state if for some reason he didn't catch it in time.

But still. Problem, damage or no. She needed to find him.

Angela sighed, forcing herself to take another deep cleansing breath, blinking up data. First things first, brain-fried as she was. Where were they and what time of day was it?

Back at DIR HQ. 2 am.

She must be tired if she hadn't figured out she was back home. Angela groaned and linked into the cams. Might as well eliminate the easy possibilities. She blinked through various public area cams. Nothing. No one other than the expected staff. No unexpected blackouts.

Training stations check. Sometimes Nik went through a round in the parkour course or lifted weights to work off his post-mission angst.

Nothing. Paul was running a line through the parkour and no one was in the weight room. She watched the parkour cam for a few minutes, following Nik's usual tracks. Nothing.

Angela groaned. "You're going to make me go look for you." She sighed. "Goddamn you, Nik Morley!" With one swift motion she threw back the covers and sat up, pulling down her jungle camo camisole as she swung her legs off the bed and stood up. She yanked on black sweatpants and sweatshirt but slipped on shower sandals instead of moccasins or her work boots. With any luck Nik would pick up on the cue of *sandals, not solid shoes*. One subtle way to defuse him.

Lastly she strapped on her in-house Security utility belt. She always kept a backup sedation shot for Nik there.

That done and ready to go, she heaved a sigh. *God, I hope he's not gone outside somewhere.* So far that hadn't been his pattern. But this last operation for the Corporate Courts had been ugly. Still, things had been quiet since their Primary, Melanie Fielding, had settled in back at home after damned near getting killed during what was now being called the Third Revolution. Or was it actually the Fourth? At least two of these so-called revolutions had happened in Angela's lifetime, and there probably had been one before she was born, beside the original American Revolution. Melanie called it the Fourth Revolution, while her mother Diana called it the Third. Woe on anyone who mixed it up around the wrong person.

Letting herself out of their quarters, Angela tried the obvious places that she saved for personal checks. Dena and Rick sat in the private Security bar, staring into pints of beer. She didn't have to speak, just raise a brow at them and get a headshake in response.

"Haven't seen him since he checked in," Dena said.

"Thanks."

Angela glanced into the main family common quarters. No one.

Several other prospects at this point. She considered possibilities. *How bad was it this time?*

If he wasn't in this next place, then things were worse than she thought.

Even as she keyed the palm lock, she heard the faint clack of skateboard wheels. Nik was here. She sighed, relieved. No one else had access to the skate park after hours--that was reserved for Nik and Angela, and the cams were shut off at that point. Angela carefully slid the door open and secured it behind her, glancing through the skate park obstacles. *Where is he?*

Low-voice cursing from the halfpipe. Angela glanced to her right where the boards and decks were stored, noted he'd grabbed his new board. She grabbed her old reliable. She couldn't keep up with Nik on the halfpipe, especially with sandals instead of solid shoes, but if he decided to be difficult, at least the board would give her a fighting chance to follow him through the park.

Hopefully he's not too tired to think. A Nik too tired to think post-mission was a reactive and potentially dangerous Nik.

She stepped off the board at the pipe's edge, popping her board up deftly. She might be a Mountain kid instead of one of Nik's skateboard kin from Sellwood, with its three-generation tradition of skaters, but she knew a few tricks. The Mountain had its own riding traditions.

Nik rolled by her, eyes fixed on the far edge of the halfpipe, wearing old black sweatpants like hers with a holey, faded gray tank tee, strands of his short black hair twisted around each other and askew. He kicked over the top and pulled a grab, hit hard and bent low to build up momentum. As he topped the half-pipe on the other side he launched into a 360. But his long, lanky body didn't quite finish the trick before gravity yanked him down hard. He smacked the floor flat and hard halfway down the pipe, then rolled down the incline to the flat, ending up on his belly. He slammed his left palm down hard and buried his head in the crook of his right arm.

"Nik." Angela kept her voice flat to avoid triggering a reaction. Her hand hovered by the belt pocket that held Nik's sedative shot. *Don't think I'll need it. But better to be safe.*

Nik slammed his hand down hard on the floor again.

"Nik." Angela waited patiently. She squatted, waiting and watching. *Won't need the shot. Don't think he'll need Medical. He's just pissed about missing the trick.* Tired as he was, that kind of thing really pissed him off. But she still remained on watch and alert, waiting.

At last Nik propped himself up on his elbows, rubbing his face. "Ange."

"You didn't tell me you were leaving, and you turned off your Dialogue." God, she wanted to yell at him. But the dark circles under his eyes and the distant stare made Angela keep her voice steady, even, calm.

"I didn't think I was gone that long. I was about ready to switch Dialogue on. What time is it?"

Angela blinked up the time. "Two-fifteen."

Nik dropped his head down onto his arms. "Jesus." His arms muffled his voice. He sighed and raised himself up again, burying his head in his hands. "No wonder I'm missing the tricks. I've been doing this for two hours."

Now it was her turn to be irritated with herself. "I should have noticed sooner."

"You were beat," Nik said. "You needed the sleep."

"But if *you* can't sleep because of the mission--Nik, I gotta know." He was capable of thinking about her needs. *Time to push.* She let a touch of reproof creep into her voice. "You gotta report this stuff to me. You know that."

Nik rolled over onto his back and threw his left arm over his face. "Ange, I don't need Psych for this one."

He's pushing back. Not bad. Time to up the ante. "You still gotta report. I *am* your superior, damn it. Especially since I let you crash instead of debriefing!" She let the last sentence snap out, aware she was triggering a reaction.

Nik *moved*, faster than most people. He knocked Angela off balance. She went limp, not resisting as he shoved her onto her back and pinned her wrists, straddling her body and glaring not three inches from her face. "I. Don't. Need. It. I'm. Perfectly. Fine," he growled, teeth bared. "Leave. Me. Alone."

Which means you absolutely need something. Angela stifled the sigh that was her immediate reaction. *Still recoverable. He's running on empty.* His hands quivered just enough on her wrists to tell her he was close to finally collapsing. *Wait.* She offered no resistance, waiting, waiting, as he glowered down at her, his face sagging into exhaustion instead of anger but still tight, still enough fury that he wasn't ready to let go of just yet.

There! His hold slackened. She struck swift and hard, kneeing him in the gut and reversing the hold as he groaned, letting himself show pain. *Not quite there. Gotta bring him out of this.* She followed up her first kick with two more, then dropped into a defensive stance. She didn't think Nik would continue fighting but better to be safe. *Will that snap him out of it?*

Nik tightened into a fetal ball, arms clutched around his gut, groaning. Angela eased her stance slightly, watching.

One. Two. Three. "Had enough?" she asked. "Or do I need to kick your ass some more before you'll settle down?"

Nik nodded, grimacing. She didn't think it was possible for him to get any whiter than he'd been before, but he looked bone-pale. "Okay. Now."

She still didn't let down her guard, not until he finally relaxed and rolled over onto his back, shuddering, arm over his eyes again.

"You want to tell me what's going on?"

Nik hissed through his teeth. "Can't wind down." He dropped his arm. "Not images. Adrenalin."

Relief flooded through her. Adrenalin rush. Post-mission let-down. Manageable, more than manageable. *At least he's talking now. I can back off.*

Angela lowered herself to the floor, this time sitting with her knees tucked into her chest. "Considering how close you came to buying the farm this time, I'm not surprised you're still running on adrenalin. Take a sedative yet?"

Nik shook his head. "Just hoping I'd tire myself out without the meds. Ange, I really don't want to take meds. The blowback is nasty. I'll--dream and I can't get out."

"You sure about that?" She scooted closer and twined her fingers around his left hand.

His hand tightened on hers. "Adrenalin like this, yeah."

She raised his hand to her lips and kissed his bruised knuckles. "It was tough for me too this time."

Tired as he was, he still had enough strength to pull her off balance and to his side, wrapping his arms around her. "God, Ange. God." He kissed her forehead. "If it had been any other voice but yours on the com I've have freaked out."

"I know your reflex speed. I counted on it."

"And I'm grateful for that. I don't think anyone else could have gotten me out as fast."

"It was tough. I wouldn't have pushed anyone else that fast. Maybe Serg or Paul."

Nik snorted. "They're not that good!"

She heard the wounded pride in his voice. "I would have pushed them knowing it was the only option to get them out of that spot alive."

"Thanks," he breathed. "Those Freedom Army assholes are goddamn fast. Faster than I thought they would be or should be. We've got to let Melanie know."

"I sent her the report on our way back. She's pissed. We didn't have adequate support and she knows it. I think she's gonna talk to Diana about it."

"Good." Nik sighed and for the first time she felt his muscles sag as he breathed out.

"Breathe with me." *Okay, mi corazón, we're going to at least do the decompression breathing exercises.*

He tensed slightly but followed her lead, sighing out deeply, breathing back in slowly. Once. More relaxation on the exhale. Again. Even more relaxation. A third time. This time his exhale went on and on, his muscles softening, inhaling more shallowly and breaking more into his sleep pattern. Angela shoved him.

"Nik. Man. Let's not go to sleep here."

"Umph? Oh. Yeah."

She had to nag him up, nag him to follow her back to their quarters and their bed. But once back there he fell into the bed and was instantly, deeply asleep.

Angela sat on the side of the bed, watching him sleep, shaking her head. He'd be back to his usual self by morning. But at least he'd taken out the key person for the Portland Freedom Army cell. *Be at least a few weeks before we have to worry about them again.*

And next time she was pretty damn sure that they'd have more backup and more intelligence about the Freedom Army's ability to wreak havoc.

Melanie would make sure of that, if no one else did.

THE END

Author's notes:

I've had this image of Nik blowing off steam by skateboarding in one of Do It Right's private skate parks after one of his black ops for some time now. This snippet takes place between NETWALK: THE EXPANDED EDITION and NETWALKER UPRISING.

One of the things I've wanted to show is this sort of deep personal interaction between Nik and Angela from a Security perspective. I've also wanted to share a little bit of Nik's temperament, as well as how Angela manages him post-mission when he's had to go do--what he does. Sometimes he's an assassin. Sometimes he's very quick, precise, and effective muscle. Angela is his key to normalcy in many ways, without her he'd have many issues. But as you can see, she's not exactly the cocktail and slippers after a hard day at work sort.

I also wanted to bring in the idea of three generations of skateboarders because, come on--skater parents are likely to have risk-taking, skater kids. Do It Right was Nik's ticket to a better life than what he had before he ran into Melanie and Angela on the Mountain, and it's something he doesn't easily forget.

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.

