

'NetWalkers

by
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Prologue

“This just in from the Albion embassy. The legendary Seneca Smith is dead.”

The pencil’s delicate lead snapped. The metal point drove into the pad, piercing three very expensive pages.

“Fuck,” Wesley Smith muttered, and punched the button on the end of the pencil to extend new lead, found the entire strip shattered and kept punching until a new tip appeared, ignoring the tiny pieces of lead that escaped to float about the cabin.

They’d come down soon enough, when gravity returned to the shuttle.

Deliberately tuning out the rest of the news broadcast, he drew a steadying breath, flipped to a fresh sheet of paper and restarted the composition.

Graphite on paper: in all humanity’s technological advances, no one had ever come up with any combination more convenient or more viscerally rewarding to the confirmed doodler. It had cost him a small fortune, that pencil and the pad of paper, but it had been worth every credit.

He’d had to build his own damned company to get it, but the rewards of funding that dive into the technological past had had dividends far beyond the spiritual. Artists around the ComNet Alliance were discovering the benefits of RealTime production, thanks to him.

A quick handful of strokes, parallels here, perspectives . . . there. A circle. Three sweeping, intersecting curves, a sensual recurve. Lines on paper achieved form, reducing three dimensions to two, became a state-of-the- biological-art life support unit against a glowing backdrop of monitors.

On the far side of the monitors, the circle became a portal on the Vandereaux system. The curves became a planet, Vandereaux, drifting past the shuttle window. Strategic erasures created a sparkle: the diamond ring of the rising sun. Three spots marked the planetary ecliptic.

Color didn’t matter in this most primitive of virtual realities, only line. Line created shape and contours, mass and . . . *gravitas*.

Some called it a focal point, that *thing* toward which all elements in the finite universe of the paper sheet pointed; for him, it was a black hole, a gravity well of meaning as well as substance, the *raison d’etre* of putting pencil to paper in the first place.

There you go, getting purple on your defenseless old grannie.

He started, barely lifting his precious pencil in time to save the even more precious lead, and stared across the cabin at that silent presence.

Silent. No way could he have heard that. No way that voice was anywhere but in his head these days. He shook the memory out of his head and returned to his drawing.

Defying an unspoken self-promise, pencil strokes shifted, grew organic, compromising the coldly clinical design. The shadows beneath the LSU spawned a figure, human, but not, elongated limbs stretching toward the portal . . . reaching . . . not for the planet, but for the stars beyond. . . .

And totally screwing the composition.

“Double fuck,” he muttered, and closed the sketchbook, clipped the mechanical pencil to the cover and tucked the tablet into the briefcase drifting on its tether above the seat beside him, wary of even that small betrayal of the lifeforce held captive in that highly experimental casket.

“The woman known to the Alliance simply as Seneca is survived by her grandson, retired

Senator Francis Smith...”

Wesley flinched—and tapped the button in the armrest that would protect his tiny portion of the empty cabin from the rest of the news broadcast. He didn’t need to hear it.

Hell, he’d helped his father draft the pack of lies, right down to the press release.

Across the aisle of the transfer shuttle, the monitors on the LSU beeped and flashed, keeping him apprized of the status of the flesh held therein.

The status of the spirit was never in question; not to him.

He’d been infused with that spirit in his cradle. As long as he breathed, that spirit, the dream that was Seneca Smith—

Purple, purple, purple.

He started, stared at the LSU, half expecting her to rise from its sealed confines, her voice in his head was that real. A moment later laughter welled up and spilled over.

“Oh, GrannieSen,” he said aloud, alone as they were, “What am I going to do without you? The ’NetAt made it clear to Pop they won’t budge on the twenty-five year rule. Six years, *six years*, before I can get back to work.”

Her silence said it all. There *was* nothing he could do about it, and that was the bitter truth. He was doomed to spend six years in purgatory—because Seneca had died too soon. And because Seneca had set The Rules a generation before he’d been born.

Across the shuttle cabin’s empty seats, just coming into view on the port side—was the source of his frustration.

ComNet Authority Station: home of all the ’Net Design Programmers in the universe. His future, his destiny . . . hell, it was his legacy. Seneca Smith had created the Nexus Space Communications Network that provided the real, philosophical, and political core of the ComNet Alliance, and where it came to the ComNet, he was Seneca Smith’s only true heir.

Familiar excitement rippled through him as the station filled the window. Delicate spires, sparkling with lights and diffraction paint, rose from only one side of the centrifugal rings, giving ComNet Authority Station a sense of *up* and *down* virtually unique in space station design. The tour guides had poetically dubbed it the ‘Crown Jewel of the ComNet Alliance.’

A fitting epithet. Crown jewels were beautiful objects designed to make power more palatable to the masses, and the ’NetAt *was* power incarnate.

The laws refining human social behavior were the realm of the Alliance Senate, House and Council and subject to the flux of human nature, the enforcement of those laws was the realm of Central Security. The rules of N-Space, on the other hand, were defined by nature, and thus completely non-negotiable. The enforcement of *those* laws was the province of the ComNet Authority.

N-Space. NexusSpace. A universal address at once infinitely large and infinitely small. A near-mythical realm unfathomable by the vast majority of the human race. A realm of theory, of mathematical equations, yet absolutely real. N-Space made faster than light travel possible, the ComNet gave FTL a reliability unimaginable a century ago.

N-Space also allowed for instant communication throughout the many star-systems comprising the ComNet Alliance. In theory. In fact, its operational use in that sense was highly limited—for the moment. His eyes caressed the LSU, and he made the body within a silent promise. That blemish on the ComNet’s perfection would change within his lifetime, perhaps within the next handful of years.

Well—he looked again at CNAS station, thinking of that same power incarnate which, at

the moment, ruled his life as well—make that within the next decade.

Because—theoretically—that database *couldn't* be changed. Theoretically. Which made it painfully unwieldy. Errors proliferated and had to be addendized. Real space echoes of those errors had to be tracked down and eradicated. Students hoping to tap the minds of masters past and present found themselves faced with a mind-numbing barrage of information.

And every moment of every day, with every upload to the DB from a very limited number of access points, those errors proliferated.

Thousands of highly skilled 'Net Technicians throughout the alliance spent their lives converting the ever-expanding information flow into useable packets.

'NetTechs abounded, but the elite of the elite, the handful who actually manipulated the very substructure of N-Space...they were the *real* jewels within that crown outside his viewport. DesignProgrammers were the explorers into that theoretical realm. They designed the hardware to better access the N-Space realm and wrote the programs to manipulate the database stored therein.

That was power. Power he'd been born and trained to wield. Someday.

For the moment, no matter his connections, it was as far from him as it was from any normal citizen of the Alliance.

Granted, he could have taken one of the tours, but he wasn't, and never could be, a tourist where it came to the ComNet. Seneca might have taken him, could have introduced him to those wonders within in ways no tourist guide could begin to comprehend, let alone match. But Seneca had left the 'NetAt and Vandereaux system behind years ago—sixteen years, to be exact. She'd helped create that body, had fought for its political independence and to give it exclusive authority over the ComNet, she'd developed the DProg program, trained the entire next generation of DProgers, and then left it to mature on its own, devoting herself to developing new marvels for public consumption.

And to raising her great-grandson.

Seneca had intended to introduce him, both to the station and to its occupants—when he was 'ready.' She'd purposely kept him free of their influence, had planned to spring him on them fully formed and ready to take a leadership role. . . .

Only to have her own body betray her before that grand entrance could be realized.

He was headed to that legendary station now, but not as a tourist, not even as the authorized DesignProgrammer he'd always assumed he would be. No, he was going to CNAS merely to deliver the shuttle's cargo, and to set up the life-support system only he understood, having helped Seneca design it. Then he would have to leave again, to try to make some sort of life within Vandereaux academy, to 'complete' an education curriculum he'd surpassed years ago.

All because he was barely nineteen and the 'NetAt wouldn't even consider an application from anyone under twenty-five.

Seneca's Rules. The ultimate irony.

Six years. He turned his eyes away from the spires now filling the viewport, focused instead on that silent presence. What in the name of sanity am I going to *do* for six years?

Once again, memory supplied her answer, the warm-but-dry tone she reserved just for him:

You'll think of something.