

Excerpt from Chapter 2 of
Reach: a Twin-Bred novel by Karen A. Wyle

Melly should be home from school at any moment. Veda could only hope that the day had gone better than most. The transition from life at the Project to a conventional human community was not going smoothly. To say the least.

. . . So much for hoping Melly's day would be uneventful. Veda heard the shriek of fury and considered ignoring it. Maybe she should allow Melly to dismember whatever neighborhood brat had imperiled himself this time. Reluctantly she put down her glass of tea and went to the door. It was a lovely day, the sky her favorite shade of green, the breeze rippling the newly gold foliage and exposing leftover hints of purple. Really too nice a day for mayhem.

She moved more quickly as she saw Melly astraddle a boy not very much larger than she, hammering away. The boy was protesting loudly but not yet wailing. Veda grabbed Melly's arms and pried them apart, then threw her weight back to hoist Melly off and away. Melly shrieked again, twisted and kicked. Veda was going to have to find another approach to these situations before Melly grew much heavier.

Unsure how long she could maintain her grip, she hissed in Melly's ear, "Settle down or it'll be a public apology. Delivered *at school*." Melly froze, then went limp. She must have picked up the technique studying the history of civil disobedience, back at the Project. Veda lowered Melly to the ground and stood between the child and her adversary, who was picking himself up and examining his injuries. Veda turned her attention to the boy. "I'm sorry if my daughter was the aggressor here. Please note the 'if.' What started this — disagreement?"

The boy's expression was initially less than respectful. As he took the full measure of her demeanor, he appeared to reconsider his assumption that she could be insulted with impunity, and looked down at the ground, shuffling his feet. "She hit me. You saw."

"Indeed I did. But as you must be aware, I came into the story rather late. My daughter is impetuous and passionate, but she is not a psychopath. She does not randomly seize upon and pummel random passersby. I imagine you said or did something — provocative."

The boy looked back up at her, sullen and puzzled. Veda sighed. "What I asked was: were you teasing her?"

The boy shrugged. "She was talking about someone with a weird name. I asked if it was one of those freaks at that old project."

Veda caught his eye and held it. He took a small step back.

"I know my daughter well, as you might expect. I would expect a verbal response to that question. Not a polite one, and possibly not one appropriate for tender ears — but verbal. Was there more?"

The boy looked around, possibly scouting an escape route. Veda stepped closer. "What else?"

The boy gulped. "I, uh, I kind of picked up her arm and asked her where the other arm was. And, um, I picked up her hair and said it must be a wig, because the spiders don't have hair."

Veda almost flinched, but caught herself in time. Tofarn was mercifully free from spiders or anything similar, but the videos of them were unpleasant enough to be widely viewed. This little urchin was not the first to draw the comparison.

"Well, then. Without knowing just how much force you exerted with your picking up here and picking up there, I can't really say how to judge my daughter's escalation of hostilities. But she should have been more civilized, whatever the company she is obliged to keep, and I will make that known to her. As for you, I would suggest keeping your hands completely and utterly off Melly from now on."

She stepped back. The boy turned and ran.

Veda heard sniffing from behind her. Melly was in the doorway, disheveled, her face wet and glimmering with traces of unwiped snot.

Veda stood for a moment, then walked over and sat down on the porch step. She patted the step; Melly sat down and scooted over to her. Veda put her arm around her daughter and offered a handkerchief. "Clean yourself up, and tell me what I don't already know."

Melly blew her nose, folded the handkerchief and wiped her face, then tossed the handkerchief aside. "I wasn't talking to *him*. As if I would! I was talking about Peer-tek. I was telling one of the girls about how I learned to play chess. How Peer-tek taught me."

Melly started to cry again, and looked toward the handkerchief, both soiled and out of reach. Veda pulled out another. "That's my spare. Make it last, if you can . . . Did you try ignoring the fellow?"

Melly wiped her face and nodded. "He just got louder. And the girl got up and walked away. We were finally talking like — like friends. She might have been my first friend here, if he'd just left me *alone!*" Another sob shook her. Veda hugged her awkwardly, then stood up. "Let's take this inside. These steps make for uncomfortable comforting." She was hoping for a trace of a smile, but none came.

Veda led Melly inside to the living room couch and pulled her down onto her lap. Melly curled up until she almost fit.

"Really, honey, you're too old to punch people. You have been for a while now."

Melly nodded against Veda's chest.

"And as my daughter, surely you can be more creative where revenge is concerned."

A small, abortive chuckle.

Veda hugged her again. "Sweetheart, I miss him too. Both of them. A lot."

Melly looked up. "What would *you* do, if someone called Jimmy or Peer-tek a freak, right in front of you?"

Veda stroked Melly's hair. "My dear, whatever makes you think that no one has?"