

ALL THAT WAS ASKED



A PATCHWORK UNIVERSE NOVEL
VANESSA MACLAREN-WRAY

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SAMPLE CHAPTER

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“At first, we were all nervous about having a Syndicate family member embedded in the crew. But Ansegwe was such a noof, always with his head in the sky and his feet in the mud.”

– Nara Ensargen
Contact Crew

MY NERVES STILL QUIVERING WITH ELECTRICITY, I turned to look for Tekere, to ask more advice, only to see the last of the team already fading into the woods. No time left, unless I wanted all the time in the world, alone.

“Wait!” I called out.

Moving automatically, I trotted over to my pack, slung it into position, and hustled along their track. All the while, my mind was full of the image of that moment. I didn’t care what the others thought. We had Made Contact. There would be something to talk about at home now.

Shortly, I managed to catch up with one of the other younger team members, Ensargen, who’d been assigned to bring up the rear. For once, he was willing to commiserate with me as we trudged along. Apparently, open disobedience of a team leader

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and smashing expedition protocols were a ticket to acceptance in the rebel generation.

For about a quarter of an hour, I felt almost like a real team member. Then my new partner looked over his shoulder and said, “Well.”

The creature was following us.

This was certainly not in the Project Plan. I glanced nervously ahead at the seniors. Had anyone else noticed? The spindly little character was small and probably tired from being chased, but we were all loaded down with expedition gear. It was actually gaining on us. I tried taking a few steps back and making what I hoped were fearsome gestures. Clearly, I was awful at being awful; the creature perked up and hurried along faster, gesturing in return. I toyed with the idea of stasing it, but my partner-of-the-moment snagged my arm. We had lost ground and jogged to catch up.

Meanwhile, of course, everyone had noticed.

“Taking something home for the maiden aunts?”

“Look, Ansegwe’s finally collected something!”

“Bets on when it’ll catch up?”

“Bets on which limb it’ll attack this time?”

I had to suck in a deep lungful of air to keep my temper. Both aunts had laid it on very thick: the consequences of one of my infamous blow-ups would be equivalent to not returning from the trip. I plodded on, keeping my eyes on the feet in front of me. But then the commentary shifted suddenly.

“Well, that’s that. Don’t cry, now, little Ans’we.”

“Who bet on ‘never’?”

I risked a look back. The creature had stopped. It seemed to be in some new kind of distress. It had lost coordination; its limbs jerked and twisted until it fell to the ground. It crawled a little distance, then pushed itself to its feet again. From my comrades’ comments, it seems that had not been its first fall. But

the next time, it did not rise. Even from this distance, I could see that its torso and limbs continued to spasm. Clearly, it had been struck previously by the hunters and was now finally succumbing to its wounds.

Meanwhile, the troop was moving on, nearly out of sight already. Once again, I had to trot to catch up, the pack banging ruthlessly. We were back on track. There would be no more damage to protocol and planning. Three more days, then baths unlimited!

I expected to feel relief, that easing of attention that comes when a predator stalking the party loses interest and turns aside. This time, there came no such release; rather, my attention was riveted behind us. I willed my ears forward, but they rebelled. Instead of the soft chatter of the team ahead, I heard only the gasping nonsense farther and farther behind. Even as I consciously directed myself to think ahead, to phrase out the beginnings of my expeditionary report, all my best neurons were devoted to puzzling out the word-like utterances of the creature back there.

Waiwai eymcumm wai can t'movma fit owwoww eywl ono estop.

I found myself walking slower and slower. I swear I could not help myself. Not when I stopped entirely. Not even when I turned from the group and started back. And it was then ... then that I felt relief, as if released from a trap. My strides grew long, rolling into a comfortable three-beat lope, bringing me back to the downed creature in nearly no time at all.

When it saw me, it fell silent, and its thrashing efforts to rise ceased. But I observed that its limbs still jerked and twitched spasmodically. It breathed hard, as if afraid. Yet when I reached towards it, the creature did not draw back from me. Rather, it returned the gesture, stretching out both forelimbs to me, despite the random quakes and jerks. I wondered at my own lack

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of fear; but then again, I couldn't smell any warning signs of disease or of aggression.

So, when it actually grasped my outstretched hand, I found it not too difficult to restrain the instinct to pull away. Its skin felt cool to the touch, and its angular, many-jointed fingers pinched somewhat. The physical contact seemed to calm it slightly, as its respiration grew slower. I could even feel a pulse in its fingertips — a flutter that slowed from a feverish racing pace to a more measurable one.

I was struck by a foolish impulse to pick up the thing and carry it. That would not have been difficult; I estimated its mass at well under a fourth of my own. Still, I had attended to our lessons during the required emergency medical training sessions. The creature's involuntary motions bespoke neurological trouble. Perhaps it had suffered a brain or neural injury, in which case abrupt movement could damage it further. Proceeding quietly and gently, I disengaged my hand, stood, and curled my fingers to form a trumpet.

"Jemenga!" I called forward.

Far up the trail, about to disappear in a thickening of the trees, I saw the group stop. I waved my arm vigorously and could see that at least I had their attention. One of the youngsters began to sprint back down the track, the low man elected to make the run back to find out what crazy Ansegwe was up to now.

About halfway, he stopped and hollered, "What is it, now?"

"Get me Jemenga!" I bellowed back. "I need the medic!"

Without further noise, he pelted back. There was a fair amount of discussion; I could tell even from that distance. Though his back was turned, I could pick out Jemenga's iridescent green bag ... and his long black arms gesticulating angrily. Finally, he turned and trudged towards me. I braced myself for a row. But he walked slowly, shifting the medical kit from one hand to another as he came.

By the time he arrived, the anger was gone. He had used the time well. Less well than I had, of course. For I had done no thinking at all, had merely enjoyed the sensation of rising hope as he approached. I believe I even indulged myself in telling the uncomprehending creature that help was on the way. As soon as Jemenga came in easy earshot, I began.

“Thank you, Jemenga. I am so grateful. What do you think you can do for our little follower here?”

But he barely looked at it, jerking and moaning so pitifully at his very feet. Instead, he set the bag down, put his arm across my back, and turned me away to face the woods.

“Ansegwe,” he said calmly. “I know you are the expedition sponsors’ nephew ...”

“Yes, yes, but I am not asking as Varayla Ansegwe. You know I wouldn’t play those games. Haven’t I been a good member of the group?”

He huffed a little, the closest I’d yet heard to a laugh from him. “Ha-hm. Lad, you have tried, but it is a little difficult for others to forget. But you have been well-educated, have you not?”

With that, he moved in front of me, one limber hand on each of my shoulders, both deep eyes gazing authoritatively into my own. It was a little daunting, I can tell you. Even then, Jemenga was a formidable person.

“Um, yes, at least I study well enough. No one would call me a brilliant student. But I generally do better than passing.” I was still puzzled. There are some consequences to youth, most of them involving the inability to follow a good line of thought to its logical conclusion.

“You know my vows, then,” he said.

“Um, yes, I think.” But of course, I had to think rather hard, and he watched my progress critically.

“*For the wild ...*” he prompted.

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“Yes, yes. *For the wild beast, respect and freedom from even compassion. For the beast in our care, freedom from pain and ... er ...*”

He squeezed my shoulders encouragingly. It came to me.

“... *release from fear. For the person, all that is asked.* Yes, yes, but what has that got to do with ... with ...” As I fumbled for words, the doctor turned me gently round until once again we were standing side to side, with his avuncular arm looped over my shoulders.

“Son, is this a person?”

I swallowed air and struggled to think. I was sure, certain, positive it was, but what proof did I have? Vocalizations that could be speech? The waving and finger motions that might be words? Its strange desire to be with real people?

He went on, “You need to understand that how I would treat this thing depends greatly on what it is.” I twitched my ears, agreeing. “You may be right, that this is no wild beast. It seems to bear some pieces of cloth or hide that is not its own. But is it a domestic beast, some strange pet? Or a person of type unknown?”

I coughed. I admit, I hesitated. Was there such a thing as a person not of our own type? There was still disagreement as to whether the Stick Men were people, and this did not look like them, except in superficial shape. Even the noises it made did not resemble the shouts I had heard. But I could not deny my heart. There were those tattered strips of cloth, which I hadn’t even noticed. And I knew how any medic worth his oath would choose to help a domesticated beast in such extreme distress.

“It is a person,” I whispered hoarsely.

“Are you sure?” I could only twitch my ears again, taut with anxiety. Could he gainsay my declaration?

“In that case, this person is incapacitated. Are you prepared to contract for its medical treatment? And to perform the duties of family in support of that care?”

At first, I could not quite absorb what he had said. I had to turn it over in my mind several times. And, well, at least there are some choices made easier by economic security. I wonder if, had I had known the outcome, I would have thought longer on the issue of performing family duties. There, memory cannot help, because present knowledge would have me decide exactly as I did, only more swiftly.

“Yes, sir. I so contract.” I said at last. The doctor presented no arguments, but went straight to his work.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

VANESSA MACLAREN-WRAY writes stories and poems, makes robots and photographs, and works towards a more climate-safe energy paradigm. She grew up in a peripatetic military family, experiencing First Contact with strange beings and new worlds as a regular part of life. When she discovered science fiction magazines hidden in her grandmother's attic, Vanessa finally felt she had arrived home.

Vanessa earned an engineering Ph.D., launching a thirty-year career in energy systems analysis while writing in her spare time. Often the only woman on a project, she never lost touch with the outsider's viewpoint, using her insights to bridge such divides. A few years ago, Vanessa reshuffled priorities, keeping involved in the energy field, but shifting into high gear on storytelling. Not surprisingly, people coping with their differences is a recurring element in her work.

You can find about more about the works and world of Vanessa MacLaren-Wray at *cometarytales.com*.

For the wild beast . . . freedom,
even from compassion.
For the person . . . all that is asked.

– from the **Physician’s Oath**

Varayla Ansegwe—perpetual student, aspiring poet, and scion of the (allegedly) criminal Syndicate—didn’t volunteer for this alternate-world exploration mission, and the rest of the crew have had it up to here with this pampered noof.

When a strange-looking creature dashes out of the forest, pursued by alien hunters and desperate for help, Ansegwe insists on saving its life. He sees a kindred spirit—a courageous, imaginative intelligence—but his team leaders perceive only an injured animal. Ansegwe has leverage, as heir to the expedition sponsor, but his problems multiply when he takes the alien home.

To prove the creature is a person, Ansegwe breaks free of his self-indulgent lifestyle and problematic family . . . shattering rules and making discoveries that will change his world.

