

THE SMUGGLERS



VANESSA MACLAREN-WRAY



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SAMPLE CHAPTER

1

SEPARATION

THE DEPARTING SKIP-SHIP dwindled slowly on the viewscreen. Boy kept all seven eyes focused there, holding fast to his attachment with Papa. Moment by moment, their connection stretched to a wire as fine as a quantum string. He knew his father was holding tight at the other end. He could feel the bright glimmer that was distinctively Papa, and only Papa, shining like a guidepost in his mind. When the ship reached its transfer point, and flashed into the skip-stream, the glimmer vanished.

Behind him, Mother cried out — a sharp cry like talons tearing through steel.

He waited, eyes still fixed on the quiet viewscreen, but no such pain struck him. Instead, a fluttering of memory unspooled in his mind. The calm, confident touch of Papa's fronds, and the way they could extend the length of their ship's bridge or curl tight and protective around a troubled child. The sensation of flight as Papa flung him high in the empty cargo bay, spinning

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and laughing, dizzy with the joy of flight. The silvery-grey featherings that concealed Papa's tools, his talons, his wise and delicate fingers. The warm brush of his fluff, when he let Boy ride atop his carapace, hunkered down, pretending they raced through the crystalline forests of Darrougha, in pursuit of dangerous prey. His voice, chattering nothings at the creatures they transported, the wild, unique beasts he loved so well.

Not so well as he loved Boy. Or Mother. Or, now, that other for whom he'd left them all.

Everyone changes, Mother said. Always, Papa had been the same, but he left with a new voice, with stripes of amber in his feathers, a sharper, more abrupt way of moving his fronds, and a quicker beat to his walk, his feet striking the deck in a new rhythm. Boy hadn't known his father before, when Papa had been female. He'd changed then, for Mother.

Now, Papa had changed again, for someone else.

When will I change?

Papa said he got his name from his father.

Who will name me, now, when I find my own self?

"Mama?" He turned away from the viewscreen, to find Mother curled in a tight ball. Her featherings twitched and a low drone rumbled from her voicebox. He scuttled to her side and spread his fronds around her. "Mama? Are you all right? What's the matter?"

She uncurled one frond and wrapped it around him. The trembling of it vibrated through him. His hearts beat out of rhythm.

"Mama?"

"I will be all right, Boy. I couldn't make myself let go until the very last." Her frond brushed over his fluff, teasing his eyes into retracting down safe. "Are you all right, my dear?"

"I'm fine, Mama. Why would I not be all right?"

A whisper of silver-grey flickered in his memory, then faded out of reach. The bridge of their skip-ship seemed too large. Something was missing. No, *someone* was missing. Someone important to the family business.

“Good, then. Not to worry. How about you go feed our merchandise and then do your studying?”

Mama did not look well, he decided. “I’ll feed the cretzina, Mama, but then I’ll bring you something.” His balance felt wrong, as if he’d just been doing cartwheels in the cargo bay. “I don’t think I can study right now. I’m worried about you.”

She patted his carapace and her fronds relaxed, but he could tell she was doing it on purpose. “Don’t worry, dear. It’s been a difficult day is all. Tomorrow will be better.”

“Tomorrow?”

“Yes, tomorrow we will jump into the skip-stream ourselves and set course for the station. The Truck Stop, this one is called.”

“Why?”

She pulled her fronds back around her and mumbled, “Not now, Boy, not now.”



Deralka watched her child as he skittered from the bridge, intent on his tasks, his questions held back for now. She had questions of her own, mostly about how she would carry out this last operation with Boy as her partner. Their specialized business, delivering much-desired prizes to persons of means, had relied on two adults capable of technique and guile, sharing the work in all its exquisite detail. They’d never once been apprehended, never failed in a delivery, never lost a precious beast. The arrangements this time had involved negotiating with dangerous predators in human shape — the secretive criminal organization that owned the fabled station. While the laws at the Truck Stop might be more forgiving than elsewhere, there were worse dangers than the law. Should humans become aware that Darroughons stalked their passageways, there could not be a good end for any of them. She might get away with smuggling the cretzina, but fail at securing her own self. Or her child.

She’d been worried about Boy. He had reached that age when children begin to mature, to form adult attachments

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— ones that should be lifelong, like the one she had just severed. *He'll be fine, it's easier for children.* Then again, stress accelerates maturation, and no one could say the past few weeks had not been stressful. She had shielded him as best she could, but she couldn't protect him from everything. Her mate's change seemed to have troubled him more than the departure. Perhaps he worried about his own changes, but didn't want to ask her.

He should talk to his father, she thought. Then clenched her fronds tightly around herself, sheltering the ache that seemed to come from everywhere but her mind. The daggers of her talons extended, ready for battle, as if she crouched in the ancient forest, prepared to defeat and devour her enemies.

The ship would fly itself for now. Though Deralka was the better pilot, her mate had excelled at programming the auto systems, and she-that-had-been-him had taken extra care to check and re-check those settings before she left.

I'll need to study those manuals, now. Perhaps Boy would like to learn alongside me.

Thinking helped to manage her feelings. It had always been that way. He-that-was-now-she had used feelings more, applied intuitions to guide thinking. Perhaps that was why the bond with Boy had been so strong. Deralka had watched the gleam of their attachment, expecting it to fail at boarding the shuttle, at reaching the other ship. Instead, it persisted right up to the point the other ship skipped free of the here-and-now.

She forced herself to think through the next stages in their journey: the job left to be done, the repayment of their debts, their escape to a place of safety.

Moment by moment, the fire in her joints eased to an ache, her fronds relaxed, her heartbeats steadied. When Boy returned carrying a tray laden with his favorite snacks and a full — and, for once, properly-sealed — flask of water, she found herself able to taste a few morsels and drink down all the water. His quietness disturbed her — Boy was never

inclined to sit still — but her own behavior would likely have frightened him.

“Don’t worry about me, dear,” she reassured him. “I’ll be quite all right by tomorrow.”

She wanted to ask Boy what he remembered, but that could be counterproductive. Children were meant to part from their parents, to form new attachments. It was part of the natural order, though nature did not design for skip-ship velocities of separation.

“Tell me, Mama —” He seemed to change his mind about what he wanted to ask. His fronds twitched as he reached for an alternate question. “Tell me about the station. Why is it called that?”

“The Truck Stop? It’s an old human phrase from when they would sail around on their oceans. A truck is a special piece at the top of the mast that the sails connect to.”

“Humans had sailing ships, too?”

“It’s not that uncommon for water worlds.” She rasped a laugh, surprising herself. “I see you have been skipping some of your lessons. What if we settle on a water world?”

He opened another packet of snacks and pushed most of them across the tray towards her. “I didn’t skip lessons, Mama. I just didn’t pay attention. I’ll do better.”

She took a few of the crunchy dried arthropods and lifted her eyes to study him better. It wasn’t like Boy to admit such things.

“So a truck stop is a place where ships stop?” he asked.

“Yes, it’s a place where the skip-ships stop — ones like ours and the big transports — for fuel and rest and recreation. The truck stop name doesn’t quite make sense, because the truck is such a small part of a sailing ship. Perhaps, when we visit, you can ask someone about it.”

He perked up at the idea. “Yes. I’ll do that. We’re supposed to be tourists, right, Mama? And tourists ask lots of questions.” He crunched a few treats. “*Are* we going to a water world?”

“We’ll see, we’ll see. Once we complete this last transaction, we’ll have our stake, we can make that choice together.” All

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those plans she'd made with Boy's father, she set aside. They'd narrowed their choices to a few worlds, but she knew each of them would remind her of what she'd lost. *I'll need to begin anew.* For the first time in many years, she regretted cutting all her attachments on Darrougha. Then again, could Boy ever be content with one world, however beautiful, when he'd seen so many places in his short life?

"All right."

He seemed as lost in thought as she was, fiddling with the snacks on the tray. He set two of the many-legged morsels against one another in a duel to destruction. The one that snapped in two first earned a quicker passage to his stomach.

"Don't play with your food," she admonished, but she couldn't conceal the buzz of laughter his antics inspired in her.

Boy made his voice deep and grumbly. "I'm not playing, I'm practicing for when we settle on the World of Crunchy Insects!"

"I'll keep that in mind." She pulled another sack open and selected two candidates for herself. "So. How do they battle? Does one have right of first strike? Are their weapons mass or speed?"

The meal not only satisfied their hunger, but also gave them many little tasks to complete afterwards, with bits of insect armor and fragments of flavored coatings scattered into the most unlikely crevices in the bridge stations.



For the final approach run, Boy chose the widest of the viewscreens and stretched one pair of his fronds around the perimeter, taking possession of the wonderful sight. The tingling of etheric energy flowing through the conduits that served the sensor arrays added an edge to his excitement. Mama had installed these ancient-tech devices a year ago, and they still surprised him with new capabilities. This time, they could watch every moment of their flight into the galactic core.

"So many stars! Mama, have they put all the stars in the galaxy here?"

Mother laughed at the joke, and his featherings rippled with joy. She stood at the controls, guiding the processes that controlled the ship. She'd told Boy she planned a route that would make the journey worth their while. It was a once-in-a-lifetime experience, arriving at this vast ocean of radiation and gravity.

The flicker of data across the top of the panel let him know just how much the shielding had to screen the light, dimming what must be an impossibly brilliant sky if one dared to look with natural eyes. Thousands of stars — no, millions — danced in their orbits. They all seemed so close to one another, he expected at any moment to see the flare of a stellar collision. He flicked a finger over the controls, triggering layers in the display that tagged each star by type, age, mass, velocity, and luminosity. By extending all his eyes, he could sample all the flavors of starlight, from deep ultraviolet to brilliant infrareds. The layers of color blended to a swirling sea of energy.

"It's like a snowstorm! A storm of light, like on Calivax! Remember, Mama?"

She made a low hum of agreement, then called out, "Shields?"

Boy already had one eye on the shield monitors. Mother had promised they'd be safe, but something told him there should be more than one person keeping watch on their safety.

"Shields holding!" he reported, feeling more grown-up than ever before.

The lower half of the monitor filled with a glowing red-orange disk.

"Look," he cried. "It's an ocean in space!"

"The accretion disk, yes," she replied.

"I know," he grumbled. He'd studied that portion of his lessons thoroughly. At the center of that immense platter lay the black hole itself. "The reason this is a safe place for the

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station is that this black hole spins slowly, so it doesn't make jets like other galactic black holes."

"Oh, is that so?" This time, he heard the spark-like clatter of pride in her voice. "Now, look, do you see the station?"

He added the filter for reflective objects. Yes. There it was, silhouetted against the glow of the accretion disk: two rings, one tucked inside the other, spokes running straight from the hub to the outermost ring, the whole spinning against the backdrop of the accretion disk's glow. No, wait, there was a third, narrow ring at the rim.

"Is that where we dock? On the outer ring?"

"Yes, that's right. Better go get your skinsuit out, Boy. We'll be there soon."

He tore his gaze from the wonderful view, but not before checking to be sure the viewscreen was recording.

"Mama? Did you remember to install the devices in the skinsuits?"

She murmured a yes, and flicked her fronds at him in approving dismissal. Humans used electronic devices implanted in their skin, mostly to communicate. Darroughon technology made those devices more powerful, but the humans would never know. Boy loved that feeling, holding a secret in plain sight.

He ran to the lockers and pulled out the skinsuits. The big one looked like a human woman, with plain unfeathered copper-brown skin and long hair that flowed like an amber waterfall when Mama walked around in it. The little one had short, black, hair with no curliness to it, and wide, innocent eyes that he could look through with his real eyes, to see far more than any human child could see. He had fun wearing it, but it was getting to be too small.

Never mind. Mama says this is the last time we'll use them.

2

DISEMBARKATION

DERALKA SET BOY to lead the way down their ship's ramp, while she spied out the watchful eyes of monitors in the primary offloading passage. A dynamo of distraction, Boy skipped along, calling out with delight at each step, each new discovery. At the turn to the final disembarkation passage, he paused and waited for her. Pride ruffled her feathers. He'd remembered that part of her plan. Next, they needed to confirm the details their informant had given.

Lights flickered erratically from around the corner. She breathed again. Their hard-won intel had been correct: Docking Bay 43 of the infamous Truck Stop station had technical issues. At least it was no more than faulty lighting circuits. The station maintained its steady spin, yielding a moderate artificial gravity. Deralka guessed her weight at nearly two-thirds of what it would be on Darrougha.

She paused to check the seals along her skinsuit's abdomen and found one irregularity. She smoothed it away with a quick,

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casual motion of one synthetic human hand. For the benefit of any hidden monitors, she also rubbed her skinsuit's back and made noises matching a human in some moderate discomfort. Beneath the false overskin, the merchandise stirred sleepily, its sheathed feet skittering across the hidden surface of her primary skinsuit. Insurance would cover any damage.

"Have patience, Boy. Nearly there."

"Yes, Mama."

She kept a steady pace down the hatchway ramp, but her mind wandered. This should have been a family trip, an adventure for the three of them together. Now, she had only herself and Boy — and their savings and debts from years of effort. Tomorrow, the mission would be complete, and she could begin to think of the next steps in their journey.

Soon enough, she and Boy would make their way back to Darrougha, for a little while. Her debtors would be waiting, talons extended, but she would fill them with recompense, satisfy their every demand.

They would make themselves free, she and Boy, to be alone but together.

Then, they would seek a home.

Tomorrow, they would gain the means.

Today, they needed food and shelter.

At the foot of the ramp, she stopped in the demarcated area, but still within the arc of shadow cast by the faulty lighting system. She allowed Boy to bounce a little, to fill the space in his lively way. The waiting inspector, a humanoid android, hesitated, focusing on Boy, as Deralka had intended, while taking that one necessary step towards her. He lifted the scanner remote by just that much, to forestall any risk that Boy might interfere with it.

"Purpose of your visit."

The delivery came flat, no intonation. This was surprising. She'd heard a great deal of the Truck Stop's sophisticated androids.

"Refueling. Respite stay." She studied his face as he spoke, and found its complexity of expression failed to match human parameters.

So, it was an android, but a lower-tier one, probably not even sentient. She'd rehearsed many useful lines of conversation, but held her peace. Those clever bits of patter would be useless here.

"Length of stay."

"Two days, estimated." She selected a simple line from her patter. "Can you recommend a good place to stay?" She patted the mound of simulated flesh that curved under her smock like a stolen fuel canister. "A family-friendly place?"

"Obtain recommendations at the kiosk."

At least the android was enabled to respond to selected keywords. Still, how disappointing. She had prepared so well.

It continued with the scan seamlessly, its instrument's path disrupted just enough to blur its view of the merchandise. She waited, measuring the progress of the scan by the indicators so conveniently displayed on its surface. Just as the android finished and began to speak, she interrupted.

"Where is the kiosk?"

The question could not be a true distraction, but the information would be helpful, and she hoped to avoid any delay after the next verbal exchange.

"The kiosk is at the gateway. See the map."

One never knew where and when a conflict situation might arise, so she tapped her wrist, bringing up local options in her heads-up display. Her device had, indeed, automatically absorbed the local map into its database.

"I see. Thank you." Was she free to go now?

"What is this irregularity?" It pointed to her abdomen and tapped the scanner with mechanical menace.

"It's my baby."

She patted the mound, pushing just a little harder where she knew the underlying shape had a protrusion. The merchandise stirred, and a rounded lump appeared at one side of the false skin, gliding under the surface to disappear at the opposite side.

"Oh, look," she said. "He's kicking. Do you want to feel it?" She put on a basic smile, painted lips curving over a closed

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mouth, knowing the android wouldn't discern it from a more complex smile.

"That will not be necessary." An interesting flow of expressions passed over the android's face, as it sorted through appropriate responses. The resulting thin smile showed a row of perfectly-aligned, never-used teeth.

Deralka toyed with showing him her own teeth, but refrained. "May we proceed?"

"Proceed."

The promised kiosk offered a variety of access panels, accommodating a corresponding diversity of travelers one might encounter at the truck stop. The queue for humanoid-types was the longest, as expected. What she'd not anticipated was the generosity extended to her. On Darrougha, waiting patiently would be considered offensively patronizing.

Here, however, other customers offered to yield their places to her, each for their own reasons. The Oannder turned an unusually deep shade of orange, and confessed a concern that she might deliver the merchandise directly to the deck, disgusting everyone with the profound explicitness of human birth.

A little old Verdia fixed her violet eyes on Boy, gave him a dozen rapid click-smiles, and babbled nonstop. "Oooh, what a pretty little precious you are, my dear. I should open up my bag right now and give you a present. Would you like a little present, my dear? My, my, you are such a sweetie! Wouldn't I like to eat you up right now! But maybe you'd rather go ahead so you can run to buy sweets for yourself at the gift shop? Go, go, such a darling, good, good boy you are!"

Boy kept tight hold of Deralka's hand and responded with wide, seemingly-frightened eyes. Was he really frightened? *Let us out of these suits, and we'll see who eats who*, she thought. They moved forward in the queue, encouraged by the next visitor, and then the next.

The last person — that is, the first in line — stepped aside wordlessly, his heavy-lidded human eyes examining her and Boy with precise interest.

Within the security of her skinsuit, Deralka's featherings twitched with warning. She made her reservation quickly, glad she had selected a hostel beforehand. The man beside her wore the most banal of dockside attire, could have passed for any worker on liberty, but he was human, and she'd trained herself to read their expressions. This one's face betrayed nothing as he said, "Please, madam, I am in no hurry." Suspicious. Very suspicious.

Within the skinsuit, she paired a high-resolution eye with her infrared one. The added visual input confirmed her first impression. The stiffness in his shoulders, the warm lump of plastic in the pocket hidden under his jacket, the excessive shine of his shoes all spoke loudly of a certain kind of human. One obsessed with laws and regulations.

The moment her device pinged her reservation confirmation and receipt of associated directives, she twirled from the console and murmured her gratitude to each of those who had let her pass.

The man who belonged in a uniform said, "Have a nice visit to our station."

• • •

Boy wondered when the fun could begin. He'd been promised a fun day, and so far it had all been staying quiet, operating his skinsuit as Mother had asked. He couldn't put too much energy into his movements, to avoid getting any excitement out of the game. He had just about run out of patience. The worst part had been that Verdian who put her face right up to all his visual sensors and showed her shiny flat teeth and declared she had half a mind to eat him. It had made him so ... hungry.

He hoped Mother knew just how much he needed a reward.

He didn't like the way Mother pulled him along by the arm of his skinsuit.

I'm not a baby.

His biting teeth ground together, making a soft noise rumble through his skinsuit like the insides of a hungry human.

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When Mother stopped at the elevator bank, he tugged his arm free and wriggled his fronds inside their channels. He wanted to message her with his complaints, but he'd been warned to keep his device quiet until she could silence any spies in the vicinity.

Her musical human voice spoke into his imitation ears, but he could hear her own voice underneath, in its familiar clickety whisper. "We have our place to stay, my dear. The luggagers will deliver our case to the hostel. Now, it is your turn. Where should you like to go first?"

His hearts leapt, a little. He knew what she wanted him to say. She'd talked so many times of the truck stop's famous Observation Room, overlooking the black hole.

Just imagine, we'll be able to see the event horizon, the very edge of the known universe!

But then, he knew, she would stand there, just watching the pretty view and talking about he-who-had-departed, and it would be an hour of nothing but standing in the dark.

It's my turn to choose.

She seemed to read his mind. "It's all right. You may choose what you like and do what you like, now."

"Gift shop! Gift shop! Gift shop!" Boy bounced and leapt and ran circles around her, showing off his agility in the skinsuit, despite its already becoming too small. He flashed his device and shared the route with her, from the offboarding deck on the outer rim to the main ring, where they'd find the Grand Mall and his hearts' desire.

She laughed along with him, but he could tell her mind had drifted elsewhere. He followed her glance to the kiosk. The man back there, the one with the funny shoes, he was pretending not to look at them, but Boy recognized what he was, now that his annoyance with the child-eater was gone. Mother had her eye on the law-man. Boy hoped the law-man liked shopping, because that would be all he'd get to see as he spied his way after them.

The Starchaser Gift Shop presented endless wonders to Boy's eyes, layer on layer of delights to feed the most glorious joy

the moment they crossed the threshold. The place was crammed with treasures from spinward to antispinward, inboard to outboard. Boy bounced, ecstatic, down and up the aisles.

He surveyed one aisle, then another, itemizing every potential purchase. The silly magnetic shoes, useful in the lower gravity down in the Habitat Ring, clattered as he ran.

“How many things may I have?”

“Better to ask how much you would spend,” Mother advised. “But if you choose wisely, you may have two things. And after, you will have one thing that I have chosen already.”

Two things! Something fun for right away, and something complicated for later.

“I’ll be very wise, Mama.” He set his device to calculating sums of costs of the items he’d tagged so far. “What is the after thing?”

“It is a delicacy that humans have brought from the far reaches of the galaxy. It is called *iced cream*.”

“Ice cream,” came a correction from behind her. The shopkeeper, a humanoid android wearing a boldly-striped uniform, looked down at Boy with a proper human smile, nearly as perfect as Mother could do. “You will like the ice cream at Burnaby Cool’s.” Then he sighted the bulge over Mother’s abdomen, where their own merchandise was hidden. “Oh, my, may I ask, when are you due?”

“Very soon. One never knows, though, does one?”

His mother seemed pleased. The android at the gate had been boring. This one had complicated speech patterns, almost like a real person. Maybe he was a real person. Who could tell with androids?

“That’s a fact. But I admire your boldness to travel this far when so far along.” The way he smiled became different. Part of his remark seemed to be humorous.

She smiled in return and started chatting, using phrases that Boy had heard her practicing during their flight. Mother liked the play-acting part of their work, even more than taking care of the animals. Boy left them talking while he explored the

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rest of the aisles and winnowed his choices down to two: a toy version of an animal from a distant planet called Earth, plus a big box full of rattling parts that promised they could be assembled to make a complete model of the Truck Stop itself. He could spend all of their next flight building the model, and it would be the centerpiece in their new home — the one they'd go to once they cashed out their earnings this time.

I will make Mama proud and help her make our new home beautiful.

The shopkeeper bundled both items into a special carrying bag. He said the bag was a special bonus souvenir, and it was true — one side of the bag held a vivid picture of the truck stop itself and the other side had a picture of the black hole, or rather, its brilliantly-colored accretion disk.

As they left the gift shop, Boy had fun with the swirling effect of turning with the rotation of the station, to head downspin. Meanwhile, he watched his mother watch the lawman being far too obvious, pretending to study the scrolling display at the front of the big casino.

I wonder if he likes iced cream?

The Far-Rim treat was all that had been promised. Boy quickly mastered the technique, to spoon the concoction just so, letting it slip properly through the skinsuit to reach the mouth best suited for sugary treats. He used his device to study the nutrients list, and found that ice cream also contained plenty of protein and good fats and even antioxidants, so it would be healthy as well. The one unfair thing was that others in the shop used their own body parts to slurp ice cream from papery sugar-wafer containers. He wished he could do that, but the skinsuit was too much in the way.

“Mama, I want to lick my ice cream.”

“Later, perhaps,” she said. “Later. Shall we purchase another serving to take to our quarters?”

“Yes, Mama. Thank you, Mama.”

Despite his inner wishes, Boy knew full well that the others in the ice cream shop would not be happy to see any

of Boy's tongues, let alone his teeth or claws. They wouldn't even like his raspy, rumbly voice, even though he could make their language sounds perfectly well without the skinsuit's hardware.

It's not fair. I've never hurt a human. No one in my family ever ate even one of them.

The law-man didn't come into the shop, but Boy saw him as they were leaving, each carrying a small bag — with small renditions of the Truck Stop and the black hole — containing iced cream packed into a cold-preserving box. He wanted to taunt the law-man, to play a trick on him with iced cream and artificial gravity and the slippery swirl of rotational forces, but Boy knew the importance of this visit. Mother had promised this would be their last sale, that afterwards, they would find a safe place, and settle down together. He would not endanger that, not for anything, not even for the best of fun.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Vanessa MacLaren-Wray writes science fiction and fantasy about people — human and otherwise — trying to communicate and form attachments in a complex universe. She’s the author of the Patchwork Universe series, including *All That Was Asked*, *Shadows of Insurrection*, and *Flames of Attrition*, as well as the prequel story “The True Son.” She’s also a member of the Truck Stop at the Center of the Galaxy consortium, with “Coke Machine” and *The Smugglers*. Her short fiction has appeared with Dragon Gems and in the award-winning anthology *Fault Zone: Reverse*.

As an engineer, she has analyzed electric power systems, studied climate-safe technology, and written extensively on energy issues. She feels lucky to live in farm country, where fields of strawberries and artichokes hold the developers at bay. When not arguing with her cats, she works on new stories and her email journal *Messages from the Oort Cloud*.

EXPERIENCE THE ADVENTURE



Attachment is everything.

Mother says, “Don’t name the merchandise,” and “Don’t let the humans see you.”

But Boy can’t resist naming the cute, fuzzy ball of feathers and knife-sharp talons they’re delivering. And why be afraid of weak, ignorant humans?

Plus, this old skinsuit works, but it’s getting cramped. Maybe it’s time for a change.

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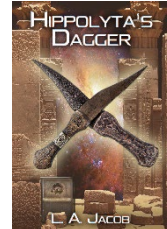
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WHEN TWO REPRESENTATIVES OF THE GALAXY'S MOST-FEARED SPECIES STEP INTO THE TRUCK STOP AT THE CENTER OF THE GALAXY, SENSORS DETECT ONLY A HUMAN BOY AND HIS MOTHER. HIDDEN INSIDE EXQUISITELY-MADE SKINSUITS, MOTHER AND CHILD EXPLORE THE STATION'S ATTRACTIONS—SOON, THEY WILL DELIVER A RARE, DANGEROUS ANIMAL TO AN EAGER HUMAN BUYER.

THEIR REWARD WILL BE GREAT—BUT IT'S A RISKY TIME FOR THIS LITTLE FAMILY. BOY IS GROWING UP, A TUMULTUOUS, CHANGE-FILLED AGE FOR ANY SPECIES. WHEN BOY DEFIES MOTHER'S RULES, GIVING THE MERCHANDISE A VERY SPECIAL NAME, HE TRIGGERS EVENTS THAT SPIN BEYOND THEIR CONTROL. IT WILL TAKE COURAGE, CURIOSITY, AND AN ENLIGHTENED MIND TO MEET THE ADVENTURE AHEAD.



Vanessa MacLaren-Wray writes science fiction and fantasy about people (human or otherwise) trying to communicate, form connections, and solve problems in a complex universe. As a mechanical engineer, her work has supported shifting to new energy technologies, especially renewables and storage. She also likes to build oddball robots who make tea and play music. Find her stories and adventures at cometarytales.com.