

**GALAXY
TRUCKER
ROCKY
ROAD**

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CHAPTER 1

A ROCK THE SIZE OF A VENDING MACHINE slammed into the shield generator with a percussive boom. The space truck shuddered from the impact.

Francesca Flores, the driver, checked her side mirror. Where her shield module had been, she saw only snapped power conduits spraying globs of green plasma from a meteor-shaped hole. Jagged ends of broken pipes poked out of the gash like the teeth of a monster in need of a good orthodontist.

The next meteor to strike her ship was no larger than a grocery-store squash, but without her shield, she was defenseless. The meteor disappeared into the tangled mess of pipes and exploded deep inside.

A groan of shearing metal reverberated through the hull. With slow majesty, the left wing separated from the main body of the ship. It drifted away, doomed and driverless. Fran was now piloting only half a truck.

Pop! Pop! Pop!

Those were escape pods. Her passengers were abandoning ship.

It was a little late for this, but Fran picked up her radio and flipped it to the intercom:

“Ladies and gentlemen, this is your driver speaking. We seem to have encountered a stretch of rocky road. By company policy, I am encouraged to remind you that your safety is not guaranteed. Please utilize the nearest escape pod if you wish to discontinue your flight.”

The announcement was followed by a few more pops, then silence. They had abandoned her. Fran felt so relieved.

From here on out, the failure would be her own. She wouldn't have to share it with anyone, wouldn't have to comfort anyone, wouldn't have to face anyone else's disappointment when she gave up on the flight.

And even as she drove into the clear, leaving the meteor swarm behind her, she knew she *would* be giving up on this flight. Half her truck had been swallowed by the meteors. She had no cannons and no shields. Her last engine was coughing black smoke. She knew when to cut her losses.

Actually, the smart time to cut her losses would have been before she got hit by meteors.

Fran sighed and switched her radio over to the police channel.

"Breaker breaker, doughnut shakers. This here's Ladybug. Any smokey got ears on? Over."

The reply was tinny and artificial. "*This is the Galactic Spaceway Patrol. Go ahead, Ladybug.*"

Fran was pretty sure this was a robosmokey, although it was hard to tell the difference between a real voice talking into a bad microphone and an artificial voice designed to sound like a real voice talking into a bad microphone.

"I need a sweeper to pick up some popcorn on Route 135."

"*Roger that. What's your twenty?*"

"Just look for the big meteor shower with the little bits of broken spaceship in it."

"*Ha ha,*" said the robosmokey, indicating it had been programmed to recognize humor but not to appreciate it. "*That could be anywhere on Route 135. What's your twenty?*"

Fran checked her road atlas. "I'm about twelve hours from Corp Inc Warehouse ABX-219."

"*Alpha, bravo, X-ray, two, one, niner. I copy.*"

"Roger that."

"*Dispatching roadside assistance to pick up your escape pods. Do you need a pickup yourself, Ladybug?*"

"No thanks," said Fran. "I can coast in from here."

"*Ten-four. Patrol out.*"

"Ladybug out."

"Out where?" asked a voice behind her.

Fran jumped. She also squeaked a little, but when she recognized her alien passenger, she calmed down and told herself that the squeak had been just a squeaky spring in her seat.

"Where did you come from?" she asked.

"I came from a wet, brown planet with a name that is unpronounceable in human speech."

The alien himself was wet and brown—and no taller than Fran's five feet two inches. He had tentacles instead of arms, tentacles instead of legs, and tentacles instead of clothes. Fran assumed he was male. She felt that a female visiting the pilot cabin would have the modesty to put on a bathrobe and slippers.

"I mean, why did you leave your quarters?"

"My life support module was destroyed by a meteor."

"Oh," said Fran. "Sorry. Um ... shouldn't you be dead?"

"That is a matter of some dispute," said the alien. "According to the Gung-Ru philosophy, all life in the universe should be dead. They say one's life happens only by accident and lasts only until the universe realizes that a mistake has been made. Then there are the Frying Nuns of Aldebaran II, who believe everything deserves to live until it can be deep fat fried in the sacred oil."

"I mean," said Fran, "I didn't know you could live without a life support module."

Humans were required to wear space suits at all times. A meteor impact could cause a compartment to depressurize quite suddenly, and there were a lot of meteors on Route 135.

Aliens, on the other hand, seemed unwilling to wear any clothing at all. Instead, they insisted on transforming an entire crew cabin into their own personal habitable zone. This required not only a spare cabin, but also an extra life support module devoted only to the task of keeping one alien alive. Taking an alien aboard was not very efficient, but Fran liked them because they kept to themselves.

Until now.

“The life support module is not that important,” said the alien, waving a tentacle dismissively. “I’ll find a way to get by without it, don’t worry. It will be a great hardship!”

He said these last words with a kind of fervor—as though he had meant to say “great adventure!”—and Fran felt compelled to explain what a hardship was.

“Yes, I know,” the alien agreed before she got too deep into her explanation. “But unlike most sentient beings, I *need* hardship. You see, I am going to be an actor. And an actor must suffer to truly understand suffering.”

“Well if you want to truly understand suffering, Route 135 is the right place,” Fran said. “But once you understand, it won’t be so exciting.”

“We’ll see,” said the alien. He sounded smug.

“Look,” said Fran, “the spaceway patrol is coming out to pick people up. Let me help you find an escape pod.”

“But I don’t need an escape pod.”

“Your quarters have been rendered uninhabitable. I’m afraid I can’t keep you aboard.”

The alien looked around her pilot cabin. “You have two bunks. I could stay here.”

“No you can’t.”

“Why not?”

Fran surveyed the creature from its slimy bald head to the wriggling tips of its tentacles. “Let’s just say I’m choosy about my roommates, okay?”

The alien’s tentacles sagged.

“Oh, I see.”

“See what?” Fran asked, warily.

“I talk too much. That’s it, isn’t it?”

“What? No.”

“Yes, I do. Everyone on my planet says so. Well, they don’t *say* so, because that would be talking. My people prefer silence. But their

silences can be quite expressive.”

“Oh,” said Fran. “Well, I don’t mind talking with passengers. It’s just that—”

“I’m crew.”

“What?”

“I’m crew,” the alien said. “I signed on as a member of your crew.”

“Well, yes . . .” admitted Fran. All passengers on a Corp Inc ship were listed as crew because they were Corp Inc employees en route to a job site. They really didn’t do much on the ship except sleep, play cards, and—when the need arose—run screaming for the escape pods. Occasionally one of them could be persuaded to help her fix a leaky plasma conduit, but when it came to facing the cruelties of the universe, Fran was on her own.

And she liked it that way.

“Look— What’s your name?”

“Wally.”

“Wally? I’m Francesca.”

“Hello, Francesca. Pleased to meet you.”

“Um, yeah. Look, Wally, this truck is not going to finish the trip. I’ve lost too many pieces. I’m just gonna coast toward the nearest warehouse and maybe take a nap. There’s nothing here for you to do, so you might as well take an escape pod and catch a ride with the cops. You’ll get where you’re going a lot faster.”

“But I don’t know where I’m going.”

“Well, if you stay with me, you’ll go nowhere.”

“Would I not be going to this warehouse you spoke of?”

“Yes,” said Fran. “But it’s in the middle of nowhere.”

“That sounds like a good place to start. I have been reading about how to become an actor. One of the stories begins like this: ‘I was working at a truck stop in the middle of nowhere, when these film execs drove up in a space limousine.’”

“Oh, yeah,” said Fran. The waitress with the perfect face for the role, the carpenter who’s asked to read a few lines during auditions, the comedian the director finds in the seedy dive bar—Fran had

heard plenty of stories about someone finding a back door to stardom, but she didn't believe them. Fran suspected the back door was probably padlocked. And guarded by attack dogs.

"Listen," she said, "hanging out with truckers isn't a way to get anywhere. Trust me, ordinary people aren't the ones who make it big in this galaxy. You got to have connections if you want to be a big star."

"But I do not wish to be a big star. I wish to be an actor."

"Not a hydrogen-fusing, radiation-spewing star," Fran said. "I mean a movie star."

"I am familiar with the idiom, I assure you. But galaxy-wide fame is not my dream. My dream is much simpler."

And this was it: the big moment where the slimy alien—Wally—was going share his deep innermost dreams. His eyes were staring into the future with all the wistfulness that two bulbous black orbs could muster. And Fran didn't want to hear it. Wally could stuff his dreams. He could stuff his hopes and fears, too, for that matter. Fran didn't give a damn about any of it.

"Dreams are for losers," she said. And then she realized she'd said it out loud.

"Pardon me?" Wally asked.

"I said ... oh, never mind. Look, I have a lot of work to do. This isn't a good time for me. Understand? It's not you. It's me. So now that we've got that out of the way, I think you should leave. Let me show you to an escape pod."

Wally stood unmoving, unblinking for half a minute—although, as the silence stretched, it seemed as though time had stopped, as though he would stand silently staring at her forever.

Fran thought she might tackle him, or scream, or ... or anything to make time start flowing again. Then Wally drooped his head and said, "Thank you. I can find the way myself."

With a sad shuffle of tentacles, the alien slithered out of her pilot cabin, and just like that he was gone from her life—gone except for a pathetic trail of mucous leading to the nearest escape pod.

CHAPTER 2

AS HUMAN BEINGS DISPERSE throughout the Galaxy exploring and expressing their infinite diversity in infinite combinations, the one thing that unites them is a need for decent plumbing. The endless frontiers, the iridescent nebulae, the twirling planets, the stellar infernos—these things lose their majesty when one is deprived of a hot shower and a working toilet.

The explorer Melanie Mellencamp once said, "If you go two days without plumbing, you're an adventurer. If you go three days, you're an animal—and a stinky one, too."

Thus it is not without justification that the Corporation Incorporated Division of Marketing, Brand Integrity, and Mass Hallucination claims the installation of water and sanitation systems is the highest calling in the Galaxy. And thus, by extension, the truckers who haul sewer pipes are the Galaxy's greatest heroes.

Francesca Flores didn't feel much like a hero as she left the landing pad at Corp Inc Warehouse ABX-219. The posters on the walls seemed to be mocking her:

"Brave truckers wanted! Fly across the Galaxy for glory, honor, and hygiene!"

There wasn't much honor in having her ship ripped to shreds by a meteor storm.

"Become a galaxy trucker: Good pay. Great job. Big adventure."

Again, someone who didn't understand the difference between "adventure" and "hardship".

"Corp Inc truckers: Civilizing the Galaxy one pipe at a time."

Her dad would tell her to take pride in that. He was a plumber.