

**The Vendors:
Escape from Capta
Facie**

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CHAPTER 1 - Tourniquet and Bandages

"That's a lot of blood," Oscar muttered, his marigold skin paling.

They were aboard the *Centurion Eagle*, a grandiose name for a midsized, purple-dusted intergalactic fuel station ship sailing through the void of space. The ship's wings, grubby from asteroid belt dust and engine emissions, bore the marks of years of service. It cruised from system to system, delivering only the *finest* in convenience foods: slushie mix, crackers, donut kits, and the snack staples needed to stock any respectable fuel depot in the Milky Way.

"Aye. Ye've already wrapped a bandage on his head?" Frankie noted.

Frankie, a troughletter from the moon Glaxid 406, stood at an imposing 7'3" with red hide. Frankie's towering frame was typical of her kind, with four powerful arms, hooved feet, and a pair of curled horns jutting from her jawline. Topping it all were her vesicular, snail-like eyes, which extended from her head, giving her an unmistakable presence wherever she went.

Troughletters spoke with what is often likened to Earth's Glaswegian Scottish dialect. Years away from home had softened the sharp edges of Frankie's once-strong accent.

"You mean 'tourniquet'?" Oscar asked.

"No. I mean *bandage*," Frankie snapped.

"Are we *really* playing the semantics game right now?" Oscar asked.

Herb lay in a pool of his own crimson blood, his thoughts dim but still somewhat coherent.

An unsecured, metal storage bin had fallen from the top shelf just moments before, cracking him on his head as he stepped out of the restroom. Struggling to stay conscious, Herb thought to himself, unable to speak to the bandage versus tourniquet debate. *To be fair, captain, it's technically a bandage.*

"Alright," Frankie said under her breath. "It's just that a tourniquet cuts off blood supply, while a bandage—"

"Frankie, I said, drop it! We wouldn't be here in the first place if you had followed protocol and tied down the big metal storage bins behind the netting like I had asked you to, and have asked you to a hundred times before now!"

Silence followed. Frankie, clearly embarrassed, avoided eye contact. None of them—Frankie, Oscar, or the *still-bleeding Herb*—realized the danger unfolding aboard the ship.

"How was I supposed to know he was in the loo?" Frankie muttered.

"It shouldn't have mattered!" Oscar shot back. "The bins should *always* be secured before takeoff. That was *your* responsibility. Herb's lying here with his head cracked open because you failed to follow basic pack-down procedures. How the *hell* did you even pass your exams?"

After a beat, Oscar added, more quietly, "And how the *hell* did I not catch on sooner?"

"How could I have known he was in the loo?"

"Because there's a bright orange light that flashes right next to the door when someone latches it," Oscar said.

Herb, still bleeding and mute, thought grimly, *That's on me. I never latch the door. I follow the "If it's closed, don't open it" policy. If you ask me, the light should just turn on automatically.*

The blame cycled between them: Frankie should have secured the bins, but the orange light for the lavatory hatch hadn't flashed. And Herb's laziness in not latching the door had set it all in motion.

A loud thump reverberated through the ship, followed by a low, garbled hissing. Red lights flashed across the ship's corridors. The trio's panic skyrocketed as an automated alarm blared, the main dashboard reading, *Check Oil.*

"Did you forget to check the oil too?" Oscar, still seething, turned to Frankie.

"*That wasn't my responsibility!*" Frankie fired back. "I went to check supplies, ye went to the cockpit, and Herb... well, he went to the loo after eatin' those dodgy Third Ring Oysters—which you and I both know was probably the cow tongue!"

Herb, inwardly cringing, silently admitted his part in the predicament. *Yeah, I was supposed to check the oil. But you've gotta understand, Third Ring Oysters are only the most exquisite variety of the extra-terrestrial shellfish in the galaxy. Honestly, they're really just clams, but 'Third Ring Oysters' just rolls off the tongue better than 'clams'.*

The Third Ring Oyster is a breathtakingly delectable specimen, found only in the deep and distant seas of the Third Ring Planets. Its subtle buttery yet sweet

flavor and surprisingly tender flesh made it one of the most desirable treats in the whole galaxy.

Naturally, the oyster's popularity coupled with its exorbitant courier charge gave rise to a notorious practice, unscrupulous restaurateurs swapping out the prized oysters for the much cheaper and infinitely less desirable substitute—*Septuple Cow Tongue*.

The most glaring difference between the two was the alarming side effect, a condition dreadfully dubbed "Intergalactic Rerectumification"—or, more commonly, the '*green apple quick-step*.' In clinical terms, this delightful euphemism translated to nothing short of explosive diarrhea. Herb, unfortunately, had taken that gamble and lost.

I digress.

Cheap bastards, he thought.

As the hissing sound intensified, Frankie's bovine ears twitched toward the sound down the hall, opposite the cockpit.

"That hissin' is coming from down there." Frankie pointed.

Well, I knew that. Herb thought.

Oscar slowly stood up and unhooked his 2003 MZA Livestock Cattle Prod from his belt.

"Why are ye goin' with the prod instead of the blaster?" Frankie asked.

"I'd rather zap something than blow a hole in the hull with my blaster," he stated practically. "You just tend to Herb, I'll be right back." He rolled his finger over the engagement switch, expecting the familiar crackle of electricity, he was met only with a dull click.

"What the...?" He glanced down at the device, his frustration growing.

"What's wrong?" Frankie asked.

Is the battery dead? Herb thought.

"I don't know!" Oscar tried aggressively toggling the switch and shaking the prod.

Check the battery, idiot. Herb berated silently.

"Is the battery all the way in?" Frankie asked.

"Yeah, it should be!" Oscar removed the battery cartridge, blew on it, and plugged it back in, igniting the prongs bright white-blue.

Another thud down the corridor was immediately followed by the lights down the hallway going out.

The bright glow illuminated Oscar's face as he approached the corner, which was shrouded in darkness.

"Hey, Oscar," Frankie called, her voice tight. "Herb's eyes are startin' to roll back."

"You just keep pressure on the wound, alright? Sit tight," Oscar said.

Oscar carefully took every step forward, making sure to give himself a wide berth around the corner.

"What do ye think it is? Better not be treshkaws or we'd really be in trouble," Frankie said.

Frankie gently lifted Herb's head, cradling him like a sleepy child, her voice shaky.

"I think... I think I killed him."

"No, Herb's going to be alright," Oscar asserted. "Let's deal with this noise, then we'll get him to an urgent care facility. We should be close to Marengoa. Stop declaring him dead and focus."

"Aye, Cap'n." Frankie's eyes started to well up.

Oscar's grip tightened on the cattle prod as he inhaled sharply, bracing for danger. With a burst of energy, he swung around the corner, unleashing a ferocious battle—one that quickly devolved into a high-pitched squeal.

"SHOW YOURSEL-aaaah!"

Mid-step, his prosthetic leg betrayed him. The compressor in his right knee made a sickening squelch, causing him to fall over.

Now, that particular prosthetic model had a notorious reputation. A recall had been issued due to a 'technical quirk'—a nice way of saying too much pressure on the right side, could create a tiny vacuum in the socket. A sudden change in pressure would lock the knee joint solid.

I digress.

"What happened!?"

Oscar moaned, opened his eyes, and looked down the corridor. He could finally see the terrifying beast responsible for the hissing—a leaking oxygen tank for the acetylene welder.

Oscar looked back at Frankie wide-eyed.

"Frankie!" he ordered. **"Get back to the cockpit NOW! We've got a leaking air tank! Take Herb with you!"**

"I can't just leave ye here!" She protested.

"You think I'm sticking around to wait for this thing to blow up?! GO! GO!"

Frankie didn't waste a second. She sprang up, cradling a fully grown man, and sprinted down the hall, her hooves pounding loudly against the metal floor as she disappeared toward the cockpit with surprising speed.

By the time Oscar had rotated himself around enough to start crawling, Frankie was already back at the controls.

Oscar's luck worsened. As he dragged himself forward, a hose on his prosthetic leg caught on a bolt jutting up from the floor. He pulled and twisted, and with one final wrench, he managed to break loose from the bolt, but not before ripping the hose sending hydraulic fluid spraying into the air, like blood from a broken vein. The release of pressure unlocked his compressed knee, letting him push forward.

As he pulled himself past where Herb had been, he slid through the slick puddle of blood that had gathered there. Oscar's body was now smeared with a grotesque mix of red blood and black hydraulic fluid, the horrifying scene clinging to him like a second skin. How he didn't lose his lunch at this point is anyone's guess.

Oscar, crawling frantically, finally reached the cockpit's hallway.

TsssssSSSSSS-BOOM!

The oxygen canister exploded, igniting the acetylene. A fireball roared toward him.

"Oh, steg..." he gasped as the searing heat of the flames singed his eyebrows and hair, and cauterized the blood on his clothes. The blast ripped a beach-ball-sized hole in the side of the ship. Just as quickly, the flames were sucked back into the void of space. Air rushed by his face and debris spiraled out into the endless black.

Frankie had buckled herself and Herb into cockpit seats when the explosion thundered through the ship, shaking it to its core. Her eyes darted to the hallway behind her, where she caught sight of Oscar seizing a length of cargo netting as his body went airborne.

"OSCAR!" she cried.

He squinted into the air rushing out of the cockpit and down the hall to the rift. For a brief moment, Oscar's eyes locked with Frankie's, as the automatic space-breach door shut between them. The solid reinforced steel offered no view into the hallway and she could no longer see her one-legged captain. She had an immediate and grave decision to make—which door to close?

The force of the decompression buckled the storage containers above Oscar. He clung desperately to the cargo netting, white-knuckling the webbed grid with all his strength. His vision blurred as his eyes began to bleed and his voice strangled in his throat, choked off as the oxygen was violently sucked from the ship.

"Oscar! Which door do I close?! Which *door* do I close?!"

Through the red haze in his eyes, Oscar looked behind him to the top right corner of the doorframe. The door's number displayed in a bright electric blue offered the contrast he needed to make it out.

"6-C!" His lungs burned.

He was lucky that he only had to call out a six. If the door had a five or nine it could've been misheard through the muffled cockpit door.

"Number 6-B!?" Frankie shouted toward the closed cockpit door.

"Charlie!" he screamed.

"B as in bat?!" Frankie sought clarification.

"CHARLIE! CHARLIE CHAR-ACH-AGH!"

His life was now in the hands of the 7'3" Bovine down the hall.

KERCHUNK!

The 6-C door quickly shut, snapping off the lower third of Oscar's mechanical leg, sending it down the breached hallway, and into the abyss of space. Fortunately, it was his mechanical leg, not his biological one, caught in the door.

All ships built after the year 2795 included a **Flesh Fail Safe (FFS)** sensor, similar to those in construction saws and cardboard balers, designed to halt the machine instantly if it detected living tissue near the mechanism. You could say it was a *Lucky Break*.

I digress.

Frankie spun around, toggled the door open, and peered down the hallway. Several overhead lights had been ripped from the ceiling, plunging the corridor into near darkness. The remaining fixtures flickered and sparked, casting erratic, strobing shadows. Frankie's voice trembled as she called out.

"Oscar, are ye still breathin'?"

Oscar had narrowly escaped a dark, cold, and infinitely empty grave. The ordeal, combined with searing heat of the flames and lack of oxygen, had left his lungs raw and his throat scorched. He tried to respond, but the only sound that emerged was a faint, raspy hiss, eerily like the air tank's release moments ago. After a few futile attempts, he gave up and pounded his fist against the floor instead.

... --- ...

For those unfamiliar with the symbols above, it's Morse code for **SOS**—a universal distress signal that means one thing: I need help.

"I'M COMIN'!"

Frankie quickly reached under the primary pilot's seat to grab the secondary aid kit and a flashlight. The first aid kit was lost to space with the *Centurion Eagle's* hull breach.

Her hooves clattered against the floor as she hurried down the hallway, med kit open and ready for anything. She froze when she reached Oscar, shining her flashlight onto his face. What she saw made her heart drop.

Oscar squinted up at the light, his bloodshot, tear-filled eyes bulging from their sockets. His throat was a patchwork of blue, purple, and pink, and he struggled with each ragged breath.

"Hey, Oscar." Fighting back tears, Frankie knelt down beside him and whispered.

He heard the shift in her tone. Something was severely wrong with him. He could feel it—a fire burned through his body.

Frankie hadn't been trained for something like this. No one she knew had survived the blood-boiling effects of a hull breach's low oxygen and high pressure.

"Oh, Mack... what do I do?" she whispered.

She wiped her tears and got to work. Frankie carefully smeared a special ointment known as *Oculus Purgo* over each of his eyes, then wrapped a bandage snugly around his head, covering them completely.

"I'm so sorry, Oscar... it's just to stop the swellin'."

Oscar was too weak to fight the pain pulsing in his eyes and lungs.

Next Frankie pried open his mouth with forceps and delicately guided a long tube down his swollen throat. The attached plastic container held an orange liquid that

shimmered in the dim light. Beneath his bandages, Oscar's eyes twitched in agony as the tube slid deeper. With the flick of a switch, the container emitted a soft hum, converting the liquid into a fine anti-inflammatory, antibacterial mist that flowed directly into his lungs. For Oscar, it burned like molten lava.

Frankie gently scooped Oscar up and carried him down the hallway. As his wheezing softened, all Frankie could think of was a song her great-uncle used to sing to her during meteor showers back home, on Glaxid 406:

*K'tead Birds' milk is sweeter.
No more time to cry.
Pay attention to the way they fly.
It's just one in a thousand,
The sky shall dance.
Take y'gaze now,
Give `em a glance.
If y'can see them, watch them go.
If y'cannot, feel the glow.
It's just one in a thousand,
That our sky shall dance.
So take a look,
If y'have such chance.*

As a child, Frankie sang in the school choir with a steady, clear voice. Now, her voice rose softly, keeping time with her hooves against the metal floor. Amid the chaos, Oscar heard her singing. She repeated the verse, a fragile lullaby, until his world faded to black. His eyes simply stilled beneath the bandages.

Frankie buckled Oscar into the seat beside Herb and took over as pilot, the only one still conscious. The ship was a chaotic symphony of blaring alarms, hissing hoses, and the groaning protests of metal under stress. For most, it would've been impossible to focus, but Frankie MacIntosh wasn't most—she was a troughletter.

Troughletters are known for two things, well, they are legendary for many reasons, but for the sake of what I'm about to say, two reasons stand out: their razor-sharp focus and their selective hearing.

Frankie made quick work of deciphering the crucial alarms from the non-crucial. She masterfully worked the control panel, addressing the necessary alarms and clearing those that were circuited into the ship's mainframe for any miniscule issue. For example, the check oil light from earlier was non-essential.

Frankie trusted *Centurion Eagle*, their repurposed Coca-Cola Plus vessel. It was a tough old bird, but she also knew *why* the entire fleet had been retired.

Back in 2378, the galaxy abandoned the idea of health consciousness or sugar moderation. Instead of reducing sugar, companies doubled or tripled it. Diet Dr. Pepper morphed into *Don't Tell Your Dr. Pepper*. The sugar craze, dubbed the "Plus Rush," spiraled out of control until rampant heart disease and type 2 diabetes claimed entire populations. Eventually, governments stepped in to regulate the industry, forcing companies to repurpose their transport vessels to ship healthier products.

However, the rushed rewiring of these ships left their mainframes riddled with bugs. Faulty wiring meant faulty alarms, and Frankie knew this all too well. Ignoring the cacophony, she got to work, methodically silencing

every non-essential alarm, her focus as unshakable as the *Centurion Eagle's* sturdy frame.

I digress.

The ship's Central Intelligence Computer (CIC) blared warnings:

Warning: Cargo Door Ajar

"Alright."

CLICK

Warning: Refrigeration Plant For Cargo Holding Damaged

"We'll check that out in a second."

Warning: Flying Jib Damaged

"There's no flyin' jib on this thing-off!" Frankie scoffed.

CLICK

Warning: Orbiter Damaged

"One wee second."

Warning: Secondary Door Initiated

"That's not even a warnin'! That's a notification!"

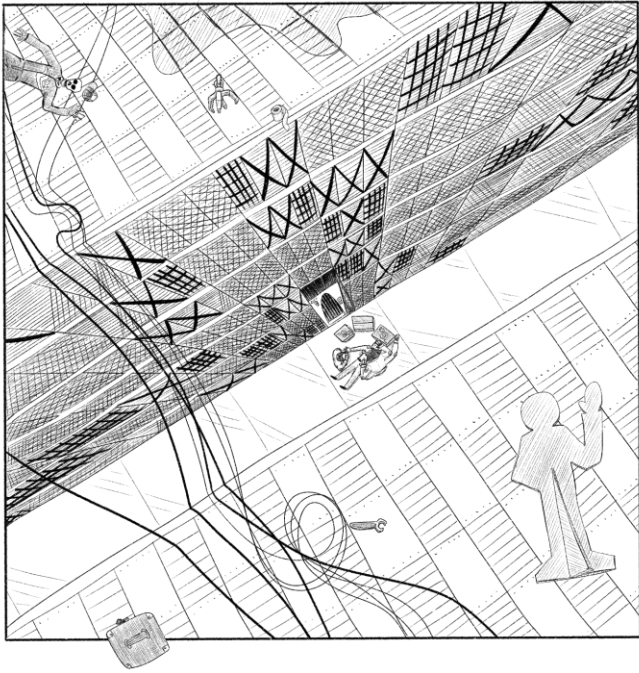
Warning: Payload Bay Temperature Dropping

"Ya, think? Gapin' hole in the side of the ship."

She continued to click through the alarms, silencing non-essentials one by one. A swell of pride rose in her chest as she brought the ship's 239 simultaneous alarms down to a manageable 17 in just 20 minutes. For context, an average vendor couldn't silence 40 in that amount of time.

Thanks to the ship's notoriously shoddy wiring, the real-time ship's log had been disabled. Frankie's brilliance, like so much else aboard the *Centurion Eagle*, would remain unrecorded.

I digress.



CHAPTER 2 - Stripping Wires

Troughletters—a bovine race that hails from Glaxid 406. A moon orbiting the gas giant Glaxid—don't sweat. Their only fluid exchange is the lubrication in their hoof creases, vital for scaling steep rock formations on their home moon. Troughletters' hooves can chafe if they're not constantly lubricated.

Frankie had just experienced her worst stress yet. She deserved a good sweat for digitally bandaging the ship's mapping and self-actuating systems, physically bandaging both Oscar and Herbert, and cursing herself for forgetting to strap those damned containers.

As their ship came out of the Lost Moon Belt, she saw a planet unknown to her. Raised on Glaxid 406, she had a keen knowledge of Astronomical Geography. In fact, most Troughlings go through intense schooling that covers computer systems, combat readiness, survival training, and Astronomical Geography. Glaxid 406 is renowned throughout the galaxy for having some of the best schools. Her extensive knowledge of the Milky Way far outshone any other individual in her vending branch.

But this planet before her? A complete unknown.

"CIC, what planetary system are we approachin'?"

Not Logged

"Any other systems nearby?"

Not Logged

"Not logged'? What does that even mean? Are there nearby rest stops?"

Not Logged

"Fuel Stations?"

Not Logged

"Moons?"

Not Logged

The computer is starting to sound like a broken record. It must be broken. Something was fishy.

She was presently passing out of the Lost Moon Belt (LMB), a ring of asteroids—for lack of a better term—space boulders. This belt was created when the planet Pegasi tore apart and dissipated into millions of pieces forming a circle of asteroids that looked like a massive belt around an invisible entity.

The trouble with the Lost Moon Belt was when the planet broke apart, it also broke free from the gravitational pull of its star. It floated through space, a lifeless, desolate, evil orphan of the Milky Way galaxy—moving in no distinguishable pattern causing havoc with navigation routes for centuries.

One month it might be near Jupiter, the next month near Kreevos-12, on the opposite side of the galaxy. The mystery of how it moves undetected throughout the galaxy remains unknown, but I'm sure our top minds are on it.

I digress.

The CIC wouldn't have the coordinates for the LMB. But no information on this planet?

Doubt crept into Frankie. The ship was severely damaged. Her crewmates were both badly wounded. Technically, she didn't know where she was. There was no way she could fly far in this condition, and fending off pirates was out of the question. Frankie was terrified.

She didn't see much choice other than praying for a safe landing—if there was land to land on. The

atmosphere was either incredibly cloudy, or the planet was gaseous. The latter would mean certain death.

"CIC, what are our fuel levels?"

Fuel at 5%

"Where the hell was my low fuel alert, ye Texas Instrument piece o' prehistoric garbage?!"

Fuel at 4%

Frankie held her breath, expecting another drop. She wasn't sure if the fuel was just really low or really low and dropping fast.

"CIC, fuel levels?"

Fuel at 4%

"Thank God, just bad timin'!" Frankie sighed in relief.

As the ship descended further into the gravitational pull of the unknown planet, Frankie's eyes darted to Herb and Oscar. She reached to check their pulses. Herb, nearby, had shoulders drenched in blood, and the bandage was soaked where the storage container had struck his head.

Herb's skin was cool to the touch, terrifying her. Well-versed in first aid and the physiologies of the Milky Way's many races, she pressed down on his vein and waited for a pulse. She wasn't just checking for *tha-thumps* but for a consistent rhythm.

THA-THUMP-THA-THUMP
THA-THUMP-THA-THUMP
THA-THUMP-THA-THUMP
THA-THUMP-THA-THUMP

THA-THUMP-THA-THUMP

THA-THUMP-THA-THUMP

THA-THUMP-THA-THUMP

THA-THUMP-THA-THUMP

THA-THUMP-THA-THUMP

THA-THUMP-THA-THUMP

"That's not good!"

Before tending to Herb, she checked Oscar. His face was flushed, but he was still breathing. Above her, in the cabin, was the tertiary aid kit. She opened it up to find bandages, gauze, instant cold packs, elastic wraps, a thermal blanket, adhesive tape, a thermometer, alcohol wipes, scissors, tweezers, and safety pins.

Frankie's vesicular eyes moved independently—her right eye focused on Oscar's name patch, and her left on Herb's. Their company badges displayed the blood type for each species. Oscar, from Martinus, had MO-negative blood. Herb, from Earth, had AB-positive.

Frankie knew blood types well. MO-negative, a Martian variant of Earth's universal donor type O, had thicker scarlet blood with more oxygen-carrying red blood cells due to the dense atmosphere of Martinus. Oscar's

blood had kept him alive when the hull ruptured, but Herb's massive blood loss and faltering pulse demanded a transfusion.

Oscar's blood was the key to Herb's survival. Unfortunately, any emergency IV kits and blood transfusion supplies were lost to the great black sea surrounding them. Frankie needed to improvise.

She grabbed a loose wire from the CIC console, biting through it with her lower incisors to free it from the console, then ripped the wire free of its insulation to create tubing.

Frankie reached for the safety pins in the tertiary aid kit. It wouldn't be ideal but she could use them to create an incision, then use the tubing as a makeshift IV. Utilizing the alcohol wipes from the kit, she sterilized her make-do equipment as best as she could.

First, she poked a hole in Oscar's brachial artery, blood pumping rapidly. She jammed one end of the tubing into Oscar's arm. Then, she located Herb's basilic vein and repeated the process, connecting the other end of the tubing to Herb.

Dis should work... but I need it to go faster, Frankie thought.

Frankie grabbed a live wire and shoved it into Oscar's leg stump. The jolt sent blood surging faster and wrenched him out of unconsciousness screaming—a sound so absurdly garbled and high-pitched it sounded more like a startled chicken than a grown martinian. His hyper-oxygenated blood pumped rapidly into Herb, whose icy-blue complexion warmed to a healthy, sunset red in moments.

Frankie placed a hoof on Herb's chest to feel his pulse.

THA-THUMP-THA-THUMP
THA-THUMP-THA-THUMP
THA-THUMP-THA-THUMP

Satisfied, she knocked Oscar unconscious again with a quick jab.

"Sorry, Oscar. Can't have ye screamin' at a time like dis."

She removed the IV tubings and slapped bandaids from the tertiary aid kit onto both her crewmates.

Nothin' pretty, she thought, but it'll do.

With all the essential alarms accounted for, doors secured, and crewmates stabilized, Frankie finally turned her attention to the ship's descent. Landing a wounded ship onto a wholly unfamiliar planet was no small feat. Her hooves dripped with sweat as she gripped the controls, steering desperately in a cabin growing hotter and more stifling by the second.

The *Centurion Eagle* entered the planet's atmosphere and its heat shielding was beginning to burn away. Frankie yanked the control stick to level out the ship. Adrenaline fading, exhaustion set in. Suddenly, she froze, realizing she'd missed a crucial step.

"C'mon, Frankie," she muttered, smacking her forehead with a hoof. "It's textbook! How the hell did I forget to send an **SOS** signal?"

Reaching forward immediately, she opened a comm line and sent out a distress signal.

"MAYDAY! MAYDAY! This is the *Centurion Eagle*. We've had a hull rupture and are landin' on an unidentified planet. Transmittin' last known coordinates. MAYDAY! MAYDAY!"

The message was set to repeat indefinitely.

The ship continued its descent. Frankie leaned back, overcome by fatigue, and blacked out.

The Intergalactic Vending Corporation vessel plummeted through the atmosphere, whistling sharply as it tore through the air. The violent vibration of the ship deploying what little remained of its reentry kit jolted Frankie awake—just in time to witness the imminent impact.

The ship crashed into a massive garbage dump, onto a precarious cliff overlooking a deep-crimson sky. It rolled and slid, edging closer to the cliff's drop-off. As the ship tilted, Frankie caught a horrifying glimpse of the 150-meter plunge into a crevice choked with refuse.

Frankie let out a frantic shriek—a bizarre "mu-raw" noise that barely masked her terror. The ship teetered dangerously, rocking back and forth, before finally settling on what seemed to be an enormous bag filled with some kind of fluid. The unsettling, squishy stability reminded Frankie of an old Terran waterbed. She grinned wryly.

"Well, that's worked out well. Eh, boys?"

POP!

"Figures."

The bag burst, the ship lurched toward the cliff's edge. Frankie clung to the captain's chair as the vessel tipped and plummeted into the trash-filled abyss. In the chaos of free fall, debris swirled weightlessly in the

cockpit. Frankie couldn't help but reflect on the inexplicable string of events that had turned what should have been a straightforward vending assignment into this spectacular disaster.

SCREECH! WHAM!

The ship slammed belly-down, almost level, into the rubbish. The impact jarred Frankie's head, leaving her dizzy, but it jolted Oscar awake.

Disoriented and missing a leg, Oscar unbuckled himself and rolled out of his seat, delirious and blind. Muscle memory insisted he was back on Martinus, rolling out of bed to greet the day.

"Good morning," he mumbled to his absent wife, his mind trapped in a fog. Stumbling toward the nearest exit, he instinctively reached for the prosthetic leg that should have been there. Finding nothing, his hand wandered higher and latched onto the emergency release instead. The cabin hatch swung open, and he tumbled out into the *schmutz* below.

Oscar groaned, lying sprawled on his stomach in the filth. His senses returned slowly, flickering back like industrial lights in an old warehouse. He rubbed at his eyes and managed to dislodge his bandages.

"What is that smell? That's repugnant," he muttered, his voice raw. "I can't hear myself. My hands. Nothing."

He moaned softly, his hands alternately covering and uncovering his ears in a futile attempt to process the silence. The absence of sound was oppressive, disorienting him further. He tried to push himself upright, but his balance betrayed him, and he toppled back into the muck. *Where's my leg? Why can't I see? Where am I?*

He squinted, straining to bring clarity to the blinding blur around him. *The light's so damn bright. That's all I can see. No shapes, no shadows—just green and orange. Flashing green and orange. Green and orange?*

As he struggled to comprehend his surroundings, a silver patrol corvette descended, its lights flashing green and orange over the wreckage. The ship landed, releasing steam and fumes.

Bootsteps squished through the slough as someone, or something approached Oscar. A gloved hand grabbed him by his shoulder loop and flipped him onto his back.

Oscar's senses were slowly returning. His ears transitioned from deafening silence to faint, muffled sounds cutting through the tinnitus. Out of this auditory haze emerged a rough, female voice, presumably from behind the figure gripping his shoulder.

"Voo damshe fink yeah woom?" ("Where do you think they're from?")

The fluid and inflammation from his injuries made it hard to make sense of everything, though some words managed to pierce through the auditory fog.

Oscar's hearing was returning as the words slid from jumble to coherence.

"Woo doom? Hoo meff I o? Oo uzz mnyone come across this place? Go check out the ship." ("Where from? How should I know? How does anyone keep coming across this place? Go check out the ship."), a male replied.

Oscar barely registered the sound of boots moving away as the feet belonging to the male voice headed toward the ship.

"There's two more! One's unconscious and the other's a bit out of it," the male called out.

"Make and model?" the female asked.

"One male human and one female troughletter," he replied.

"A troughletter? Never seen one alive before," the female commented, her tone sharp with curiosity.

"What are you thinking?" the male asked.

"Stick to protocol." she said dryly.

"Alright, go ahead and call in a prisoner transport. I'll check for anyone else inside," he ordered.

Oscar felt her kneel close, but through his blurry vision, he couldn't make out the tranquilizer gun aimed at him. The Charge Tranquilizers were engineered for total incapacitation, shutting down all voluntary functions except the heart, lungs, and brain for a minimum of 14 hours. Each dart delivered a steady electrical charge to maintain blood flow and could even act as a resuscitation tool if needed. Oscar barely registered the sharp sting in his neck before the effects took hold and the world dimmed as his consciousness slipped away.

Sentry Graff moved methodically through the vending vessel, piecing together the story from the wreckage and checking for any additional survivors. He paused by the ruined air tanks, noting the extensive damage, then made his way to the cockpit. His gut tightened as he realized something was off.

"Beau... Beau!" he barked.

"What Graff!?" Sentry Beau stood, annoyed.

"Did you grab that troughletter?" Graff asked, his voice sharp with urgency.

Beau pulled the service blaster from its holster, her tone cautious.

"Not yet. Why?"

"I'm one short," Graff said.

"Where'd you put it?" Beau pressed.

Graff reached for his holster, scanned the cockpit, and retraced his steps. A faint hissing sound from the rear of the ship made his stomach drop.

"I'm not sure. I might've left it near the back door," he admitted.

"Copy," Beau replied curtly, moving toward the ship.

She circled the ship and spotted a delirious troughletter stumbling away. Frankie spun to face her, unsteady but defiant. Before she could move, Graff lined up a dart from the hatch and fired. Frankie slowly fell to her knees and then slumped over.

Sentry Beau nodded to Sentry Graff and stepped into the hatch Frankie had just exited, scanning the area briefly before heading to the cockpit. The two holstered their blasters, and Graff strode over to Herb's chair. Beau watched his eyes widening.

"What?" she demanded, stepping closer.

Graff gestured wordlessly. Beau rounded the chair, her jaw tightening as recognition dawned.

"Is it really him?" she asked.

"Oh, it's *him*. That is definitely the Hell Flyer." Graff confirmed grimly.

"Did you call-in for prisoner transport?" Beau asked.

"Yes," Graff replied. "They usually assign Gray Top trainees to this sector, so it'll be slow."

"Well, it'll be a helluva first day for somebody," Beau said dryly.

CHAPTER 3 - What Is That Thing?!

A cacophony of beeping, hissing, and vibrations dragged Frankie from her tranquilizer-induced slumber. Her eyes flicked open to see herself surrounded by various machines and encased in what could only be described as a grotesque medical contraption. Tubes snaked through the onesie she was wearing, connecting her arms to a rubber vat suspended from the ceiling. To her left, a woman sat in a chair, silently observing and scribbling notes on a tablet.

Frankie tried to lean forward, but an immense pressure held her body firmly in place. Her surroundings weren't solid—they were gelatinous. She was submerged in a dense, jelly-like substance, tightly encased in a bladder sealed snugly up to her neck, like an over-inflated balloon.

"Hey! Why've ye got me in a water balloon?!"

The woman didn't answer. Without so much as a glance, she swiped her tablet, recording Frankie's outburst, then stood and walked over to the pod. Placing the tablet onto a glowing rectangle on top, she turned and exited the room without a word.

Moments later, the bladder began compressing the viscous fluid tighter around Frankie's body. She felt the seal around her neck roll slowly upward, creeping toward her mouth. Panic set in. She'd never breathed anything but air, and unless she was about to miraculously grow gills, suffocation was imminent.

The bladder's progress halted below her horns. Acting on instinct, Frankie jerked her head downward, her

horns piercing the bladder and rupturing the seal. Viscous fluid gushed out, and the crushing pressure released instantly. With a squirming, furious effort, she tore free of the bladder and tumbled onto the floor.

As Frankie slowly stood, goo dripping off her, the woman reentered the room. The woman froze, her eyes widening at the sight of the 7'3" troughletter rising before her.

Frankie didn't hesitate. She lunged, grabbing the woman's left leg with her lower right hoof, her left shoulder with her upper right, her mouth with her upper left, and securing the woman's right hand with her lower left. Frankie dragged her away from the doors ensuring no one outside could see what was happening.

Lowering her voice, Frankie hissed, "Bach-bo-sha, ye really give me the heebie-jeebies. I'm gonna move my hoof from yer mouth and if ye scream, I'll break yer leg—and then the other one. You mind me, woman?"

The woman nodded, her eyes wide with terror. Frankie studied her for a moment before continuing. She had a tough time trusting someone involved with that bladder.

"Right, so let's go over the rules again. If ye do anythin' but answer my question, I'm gonna break yer leg. Aye?"

Another nod. Frankie noticed a white light flickering on the side of the woman's head and growled.

"Right."

As Frankie began to remove her hoof, the woman took a sharp breath in.

"HELP!"

Without hesitation, Frankie tightened her grip and snapped the woman's leg. A sickening crack echoed through the room. The woman screamed into Frankie's hoof, tears spilling down her face.

A sharp memory flashed through Frankie's mind.

"I hated doin' that. I told ye twice, woman!"

Releasing the broken limb momentarily caused it to dangle at an unnatural angle.

"Right, sorry about that. But I warned you!"

This did nothing to quiet the muffled screaming, which only grew louder as blood rushed to the break, igniting every nerve in excruciating pain. Panicked, Frankie quickly reapplied pressure, but it was too late. The woman's cries turned into a choked gasp before she slumped into unconsciousness.

Frankie gently laid the woman on the ground, stepped gingerly over the woman, and made her way into the hallway.

The floor was white, impossibly clean, and reflective, with a faint purple-wood grain pattern running down the center. The hallway stretched endlessly in both directions, eerily silent and devoid of movement. Frankie's hooves squealed and slurped on the slick surface, making walking more difficult than she'd anticipated. She stumbled at first but gradually adjusted her gait.

Two doors down, Frankie spotted Oscar through the window in the door, suspended in the same kind of bladder she had been trapped in. He wore a similar onesie, one leg knotted. Tubes and cables hung from the ceiling, supporting the bag. Nothing else touched the floor.

Frowning, she scanned Oscar's setup. There was no visible breathing apparatus. Without hesitation, Frankie reached into the bag with all four arms and yanked him free, cradling him gently as she lowered him to the ground.

She checked for a pulse. Relief washed over her as she felt a faint rhythm.

"Well, if yer alive, let's hope Herb is too," she muttered.

Oscar was breathing, but didn't respond when she shook him gently. Her frustration bubbled over as she thought about everything that had gone wrong.

"I hate this."

She hated that she'd forgotten to secure the BMSB on the ship. She hated seeing her coworkers hurt. She hated crashing on an unknown planet. And now, she hated waking up in a jelly-filled bag, breaking someone's leg, and pulling her captain out of *this* bladder pod.

With no better options, she hefted Oscar over her shoulder like a sack of potatoes and trudged down the hallway. At first, her hooves slipped and skidded on the polished floor, but as she gained traction, her pace smoothed into a slow and steady trot.

The doors lining the hallway were plain, numbered sequentially:

O-376

O-378

After passing dozens of identical doors without spotting a single maintenance room or janitorial closet, Frankie grew annoyed. *Where the hell are the supply closets? Are ye tellin' me that there's not a single stockroom in this*

place? She began checking both sides of the hallway more carefully.

O-402

Switch.

O-403

Switch.

O-404

Her irritation mounted with each blank wall and featureless door. *Where in the hell is any sort of closet?!*

J-003

Switch.

O-417

Switch.

O-418

Switch.

Finally, her curiosity piqued as she passed the "J" designation. *I wonder if 'J' stands for... ah, bach-bo-sha.*

She spun on her hooves for a quick 180-degree turn—**THUMP.**

Oscar's head smacked against the wall with a dull sound.

"Sorry, Oscar!" she winced.

Frankie didn't hesitate. She grabbed the handle, threw the door open, and rushed inside, slamming it shut behind her. Oscar hung limp over her shoulder as her heart skipped a beat.

In front of her stood a man in a pristine white uniform with orange accents. He regarded her calmly, completely unperturbed.

"Can I help you?" he asked. "I didn't think I had any jointing appointments scheduled for today."

"Jointin'?" Frankie inquired, tilting her head.

"Yes, ma'am. Jointing. Where our patients may obtain artificial joints for comfort and functionality," the man replied, his tone rehearsed.

Frankie blinked, unsure what to make of his words—or the curious look he was giving her. A moment of self-awareness hit her: she was dripping with jelly, carrying an unconscious, one-legged man slung over her shoulder. She scrambled to talk her way out.

"Ah! My mistake. I was lookin' for the Janitorial Closet."

The attendant squinted slightly, his expression skeptical.

"Janitorial Closet?" he echoed. "I'm not sure if we have any on this floor. Is the gentleman on your shoulder... alright?"

Frankie glanced at Oscar, still limp.

"This is... Bob," she lied. "He just finished an epileptic episode."

The man interlocked his hands in front of him.

"So, you were heading to the... 'Janitorial Closet'?"

"I figured if he had another fit, it'd be best to grab a pillow or somethin' soft to rest his head on," Frankie said, keeping up the ruse.

"I see. Well, how about I call for some assistance to direct you to that... *Janitorial Closet?*" he offered.

"That'd be grand! First, could I grab yer name?" Frankie asked, feigning interest.

"Of course! Where is my professionalism?" the man said, extending his hand. "I'm Joint Specialist Falander. And you are?"

"Audrey Flatburner, from the Mailroom," Frankie lied smoothly, shaking his hand.

"Mailroom, huh?" Falander replied, raising an eyebrow. "Fifteen years in this facility, and I've never heard of a Janitorial Closet. Now we've got a Mailroom too? Fascinating."

An uncomfortable silence settled between them. Frankie was sure she'd been made. Falander tried to pull his hand back from the handshake.

THWACK-THUMP-POP

Frankie yanked hard, twisting her body as she swung the jointing specialist through the air and slamming him into the wall. He crumpled, groaning, his dislocated shoulder rendering him unable to move. Frankie approached Falander, who raised a trembling hand.

"Please don't kill me," he pleaded.

"I can't have ye callin' for help," Frankie said flatly.

"They're going to catch you," Falander mocked weakly. "There's not another one of your kind on this whole planet."

Frankie bent down and pinched his dislocated shoulder. The excruciating pain caused him to pass out immediately. She let out a heavy sigh, assessed her surroundings, and set Oscar down in a chair.

"I don't know this place, Oscar," she muttered.

She paused, hoping against hope that Oscar would stir and offer some reassurance. But he stayed silently unconscious.

Resigned, she picked him back up and started toward the door. Her ears twitched and flicked, angling toward the faint sound of radio chatter. The noise was coming from Falander's body. Turning back, she flipped Falander over and lifted him by the foot, dragging his head closer to investigate.

Radio chatter buzzed through a small, glowing light embedded on the side of his head.

"-Negative. There's a troughletter in J-003, and we've possibly lost Falander. Two encasements en route. ETA 60 seconds."

"Bach-bo-sha!" Frankie cursed.

She squinted at the light, noticing a tiny ring alongside it. Pinching and tugging at the ring yielded no results, so she jabbed at it with the sharp edge of her hoof. A soft click followed, and the ring popped out slightly revealing a short, bright rod. With a quick tug, Frankie pulled the radiant communicator from Falander's head. The chatter continued through the rod.

"...copy that. We've dispatched two squads coming from either side of the hallway."

She gripped the communicator and unceremoniously dropped Falander back onto the floor. The radio squawked, "40 seconds."

Steeling herself with a deep breath, she stepped back into the hallway and resumed her path with quick, determined strides. There was a corner about 20 feet in front of her.

Her heart raced as one of her eyes swiveled to watch her back, spotting one squad rounding the corner behind her. Six figures in gray uniforms approached—two with shields, two with syringes, and two carrying black and white pulse rifles of a make she didn't recognize.

"Thirty-five feet from your position," the communicator buzzed.

"Copy. We're fifteen feet away."

Frankie repositioned Oscar onto her back, his limp form held against her with two hooves like a strapped

down cargo pack. *I'm 784 pounds of troughletter, and there ain't a soul here who can stop me.*

She broke into a full sprint, closing the distance in seconds. Charging full tilt, she briefly ran horizontal along the wall to round the corner.

The shield-bearers froze, causing the squad to pile-up.

"WHAT THE HELL IS THAT THING?!" one of them screamed.

Gasps and shrieks erupted from the squad in front of her. As Frankie reconnected to the ground, she barreled through them like a bowling ball smashing through pins.

The shield-bearers were the first to go, sent hurtling into the walls as Frankie plowed through them with brutal force. One of the syringe-wielding anesthesiologists made a desperate move, his arm snapping around her left thigh as he plunged his syringe deep into her leg. The sheer force of her movement sent him airborne, spinning like a helicopter blade until he crashed into the wall.

The rest of the squad either cowered or fell underfoot, trampled in the chaos. Frankie didn't stop to assess her work; she had already turned her attention to the elevator at the end of the hallway.

Repositioning Oscar in front of her, cradling him like an injured child, she pressed the "down" button and waited. Her mind churned with frustration, replaying the events that had led her here—her failure to secure the container, the crash, the pain her crewmates endured, and now the chaos of this facility.

Personally, I think Frankie had been far too hard on herself.

I digress.

The other squad, hearing the loud commotion from around the corner, assumed their comrades had subdued the trespassing troughletter. Confident in their numbers, they slowed their pace to a brisk walk. As they came around the corner, the sight of the carnage brought them to an abrupt halt. Nearly in unison, they turned to see Frankie standing in the elevator, nonchalantly waving as the doors slid closed.

Inside the elevator, she pressed the button for the lobby. If there was one thing the Milky Way Galaxy universally agreed upon, it was the organization of elevator buttons: the placement, the shape, the order, even the omission of a 13th floor button.

Leaning against the cool, metal wall, she felt a sharp pinch and a rush in her leg. Glancing down, she realized the syringe had fully depressed when she pressed against the wall.

"Oh, *bach-bo-sha*," she muttered, pulling the needle out. A single drop of blood fell from the tip, splattering onto the floor.

Her thoughts raced: *Was it Propofol from Earth? Brozedge from Mars? Hypslothsol from Glaxid 406? Ketamine? The possibilities rolled through her mind. Fentanyl from Earth? Mercurialhydrocodine from Mercury II? Hydroxyzine from Earth?*

The communicator buzzed in her hoof: "It's on the southern elevator. Heading to the lobby level."

"Copy that," came the reply.

Frankie's hooves were drying by the second, and the sedative coursing through her veins made standing and seeing straight increasingly difficult. Her vision blurred as she leaned against the elevator wall, each breath heavier than the last. The only silver lining was that the other half of the dose remained in the syringe stuck in that poor sod decorating the ceiling.

The elevator moved quickly, racing through the floors. Frankie's heart pounded as she realized just how little time she had. Her mind scrambled to recall something—anything—from the military strategy classes back on Glaxid 406.

Battle Strategy 101, One against an unknown number of attackers. Flankin' maneuvers and diversions are out. Guerilla-style attacks? Useless in a lift. Retreat? Not an option. Oscar as a human shield? Absolutely not. Shock and awe, it is, then. She growled low in her throat, her determination solidifying.

"SHOCK AND AWE THE BASTARTS!" she roared, repositioning Oscar onto her back as the elevator dinged and the doors slid open.

She charged forward, immediately met by two massive squads. The first ranks of these poor 'bastarts' scrambled to form a shield wall, but they hadn't counted on Frankie's sheer brute force. She snatched a shield from the closest guard, swinging it like a baseball bat. The first swing sent several soldiers sprawling, shields clattering to the ground. She swung again, clearing a path through the mass of uniforms with the precision of a slugger aiming for the fences.

But the numbers were against her. For every guard she knocked down, another two seemed to take their

place. Frankie's breathing grew labored as she fought, her arms a blur of motion.

Then came the realization: she wasn't getting out of this. Her mind raced. *If I'm going down, Oscar's got to get out—one way or another.*

Frankie had to find a route of escape for Oscar, or more grimly, find a way to kill him as quickly and painlessly as possible. She knew she'd be taken into custody or killed, but she'd rather die knowing that Oscar was spared, than leave him to the mercy of the merciless.

Each of her independently swiveling eyes scanned the lobby. On the far wall, she spotted it: a medium-sized metal flap. A chute, maybe—or a *dead* end. Either way, it was her only shot.

Three volleys of darts struck her, small clouds of sedatives plunging into her body. Her limbs grew heavy, and the world tilted as the drug took its toll. Gritting her teeth, Frankie swung her shield one last time, scattering the guards in front of her. With a mighty heave, she hurled the shield into the crowd, buying herself precious seconds.

Frankie hoisted Oscar over her head, cradling him like a perfectly weighted football. She took a deep breath, aimed, and launched him toward the flap with every ounce of strength she had left. Time seemed to slow as he soared through the air, his limp body spiraling toward the flap.

If it's a chute, he'll make it. If it's not... Frankie pushed the thought away.

Her eyes welled with tears as her vision darkened. She felt the final wave of sedative washing over her, she fell to a knee.

Oscar disappeared through the flap with a clean, satisfying *swoosh*.

Frankie managed a faint smile, her last thought drifting through the haze: *Nothing but net*.

Her eyes rolled back, and she crashed to the floor, unconscious.