

Hal Spacejock

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Book One in the Hal Spacejock series

www.spacejock.com.au

An incompetent, accident-prone pilot is given one last chance to save his ship. An ageing robot is trusted with a midnight landing in a deserted field. And a desperate businessman is prepared to sacrifice both of them to get what he wants ...

Combining relentless action with non-stop laughs, Hal Spacejock explodes onto the science fiction scene with the subtlety of a meteor strike and the hushed reverence of a used car salesman.

Hal glanced in the mirror and studied the two robots huddled together in the back seat. "I suppose you'd better give me your names."

The tall, bronze robot gestured at his shorter companion. "This is DO-P, and I'm FRT-1."

"What are your proper names?"

"We've never had any."

"Well I'm not calling you Dopey and Farty." Hal inspected the fugitives, then pointed to the bronze one. "You can be Clyde, and he can be Albion."

"I think that's Bonnie."

Hal looked pleased. "I'm glad you like it. My name's Hal, by the way. Hal Spacejock."

'The quirkiest genre satire to hit bookstores since Terry Pratchett's *Discworld*' *The West Australian*

What are readers saying about Hal? (No spoilers!)

"I would just like to say these novels are probably the best I have read in a long time, and that is no mere comment as I am a avid reader. They give me so much joy to read them it is one of the few stories that consumes me, I actually feel like I am there - a part of the adventure you might say."

"An excellent effort with the books. Truly an excellent effort. Your characters are a welcome relief from the everyday boredom that surrounds us. This is the funniest series I've read."

"It was a laugh a minute, it really was. I carried it around for three days reading whenever I had some free time. I think this is the first series I've read where the books have done nothing but get better."

"Hal Spacejock was the damn funniest sf book I have ever read and I have read a few! Keep this up and you might just shock people with a bloody bestseller!"

"Can't wait to read the new book, absolutely love the series so far. They are p-s-my-pants laugh-out-loud hilariously funny."

I love your books. When I got my hands on the first one I read it in a couple of hours. I was so absorbed. I read the other two by the end of the week. Can't wait to get my hands on No Free Lunch."

"To let you know how much I enjoy your books, I feel that Hal and Clunk are not just characters in a book, but friends of mine."

"I absolutely love your books! They're brilliant! I couldn't stop laughing and i couldn't put them down."

"I loved the first three Spacejock books and can't wait for No Free Lunch. (My daughter loves them too) Thanks for such a great read."

"Thanks for the wonderful, amazing, brilliant books! Keep on writing!"

Read more: www.spacejock.com.au/Hal1Feedback.html

Dedicated to my family

CHAPTER 1

Hal Spacejock was hunched over the *Black Gull's* flight console, studying a small chessboard balanced amongst the toggle switches, warning lights and status displays. Recently he'd read an article which claimed that playing the ancient game would sharpen his mind, improve his memory and increase his attraction to the opposite sex, and he'd made chess a part of his daily routine ever since.

Unfortunately there was a limited choice of opponents aboard the *Black Gull*. Hal didn't want to play with himself, in case he lost, and only alternative was the flight computer. Like the ship, the Navcom was outdated, underpowered and overworked, but it was more than capable of running life support, accounts and navigation while simultaneously thrashing Hal at simple board games.

Now, after two hundred and seventy-six losses in a row, Hal was beginning to doubt the article's claims. He didn't feel any smarter and he couldn't remember the last time he'd spoken to a member of the opposite sex, let alone attracted one.

"It's your turn," said the Navcom, in a neutral female voice.

Hal eyed the full set of pieces, all of them in their starting positions. "I'm working on my strategy."

"While you're flipping coins, can I tell you about a special offer?"

"What kind of offer?" asked Hal suspiciously. He'd already picked up his chess set in an 'exclusive limited deal', using a banner ad embedded in the article, and he still wasn't convinced the pieces were carved from rare mint wood.

"Planet Books have a chess title on sale."

"Really? Put it on main."

The viewscreen above the console turned red, and the word 'SALE' appeared in vibrating yellow text. Just before permanent eye damage set in, the letters grew stubby little legs and jogged off the screen.

"I don't need all this crap," said Hal. "Just show me the deal."

"Almost there," said the Navcom. "Keep watching."

A shopping trolley rolled into view, releasing a flock of doves. They exploded in mid-air like a kettle full of popcorn, and clouds of feathers fluttered to the ground. Swarms of ants picked up the feathers and formed the words 'Special Offer', before a gust of wind blew the ants and feathers over the horizon. Finally, a book title flashed up on the screen.

"Chess for the intellectually challenged?" said Hal, staring at the cover in disbelief. "Is this some kind of joke?"

"It's part of a popular series," said the Navcom.

"What are the others? Navigation for nutters? Moon landings for morons?"

"Shall I add those titles to your basket?"

"I don't want any of them. And if you get any more offers like those, keep them to yourself." Hal turned to the board and moved a pawn. "E2 to E4."

There was a slight delay. "E7 to E5," said the computer.

"Got you thinking, eh?"

"I was deflecting an enquiry about an unpaid account."

"Bills won't be a problem much longer."

"No?"

Hal shook his head. "I've organised a meeting with the finance company. We're getting another loan."

"You haven't paid off the first one."

"Don't worry about it," said Hal with a casual wave of his hand. "These people love lending money."

"Not if they don't get it back again."

"You fly the ship and I'll handle the cash. Got it?"

"Are you instructing me to place the *Black Gull's* finances in your hands?"

"Absolutely."

"Very well." The console screens flickered. "On monitor one you will notice a final demand from Lamira Ground Control for landing fees, amenities and stamp duty. Monitor two is showing an overdraft penalty from the bank and monitor three contains a list of fuel and maintenance bills in descending date order."

Hal looked from one screen to the next in growing concern. "You'd better hide that lot before the loan people get here. They might get the wrong idea."

"Or the right one," said the computer. The screens flickered and refilled with stacks of credit chips, gemstones and gold bullion. "Is this better?"

"Very funny," growled Hal.

"Your financial situation would improve if you weren't so fussy selecting cargo jobs."

"I've told you before, I'm not doing anything illegal. Governments are short of ships, and they'll snatch the *Gull* if I so much as look at a double yellow line."

"What about that cargo of medicinal products you were offered?"

"Drugs."

"And the shipment of home defence equipment?"

"Weapons."

"Those young men who wanted passage to Forg?"

"Escaped convicts. Broke and desperate."

"What about Jerling Enterprises? They seemed legitimate."

Hal snorted. "A front for the local crime lord."

"How do you know?"

"Instinct. I could tell by the way they spoke. And the cargo sounded shifty."

"What's suspicious about robot parts?"

"They're stolen goods, of course. Painting 'Robot Parts' on the crates might fool some, but I'm too quick for that old dodge."

"Very well, perhaps you could describe an acceptable job so that I might filter out the undesirables."

Hal shrugged. "Something quick and easy. Pays well, no risk."

"In the freelance cargo business?" The Navcom was silent for a moment. "Have you considered another profession?"

"No I bloody haven't. I know there are jobs out there, you'll just have to find them."

"There may be suitable jobs elsewhere, but we're docked on Lamira. This is a mining colony, so the range of freight work is somewhat limited."

"It's the only place we could afford the landing fees."

"Which you still haven't paid."

"Me?"

"You're in charge of accounts. Incidentally, there's a call from Ground Control. Shall I put them on?"

"Eh? No, tell them I'm busy."

A chime rang out from concealed speakers.

"Now what?"

"There's someone on the landing ramp."

"The loan arranger?"

"I can't say. My external camera is missing."

"So how do you know there's anyone outside?"

“Because they’re pressing the doorbell,” said the Navcom, as the chimes rang out again.

Hal stood, strode to a set of controls on the wall and pressed the upper button. Hydraulics whined as the heavy circular door swung open, and Hal ducked into the cramped airlock. Once inside, he used a second set of controls to open the outer door, but before it was half open there was a hair-raising growl and a huge robot squeezed into the ship.

Hal took one look at the grasping hands, jagged steel teeth and blood-red eyes and fled to the flight deck. He slammed the inner door and fumbled for the lock, but before he could activate it the door burst open. Hal dived for the access tube at the rear of the flight deck, hoping to escape via the cargo hold, but he only managed two steps before the robot cut him off.

Hal and the robot faced each other for a couple of seconds, and then a short, middle-aged man strolled into the flight deck. He had a smooth, pale face and slicked-back hair, and his heavy overcoat was buttoned up to his neck.

“Who the hell are you?” demanded Hal.

“Vurdi Makalukar at your service,” said the man softly.

Hal nodded towards the hulking robot, unwilling to point in case it tore his arm off. “Is this thing yours?”

“Brutus accompanies me on my rounds.” Vurdi crossed to the console and turned the pilot’s chair, grimacing as he saw the exposed stuffing. He looked around for an alternative and found none. “Let us begin,” he said, sitting on the edge of the seat. “I represent Garmit and Hash, Mr Spacejock, and I’m here to –”

“You’re the loan guy?” broke in Hal.

Vurdi nodded.

Hal gestured at the robot. “Do you treat all your clients like this?”

“Brutus usually breaks a leg or two first, but in your case I felt it wasn’t necessary. After all, it’s a relatively modest sum of money.”

“Breaks a leg?” Hal eyed the hulking robot. “Do you get much repeat business?”

“None, if I do my job properly.” Vurdi sat back. “Now, are we paying by cash or cheque?”

“I don’t care. It’s all the same to me.”

Vurdi smiled. “I confess, I came here expecting the worst. It’s most gratifying that you have the money to pay me.”

“Pay you? No, you’ve got it all wrong. You’re here to set up a loan.”

The smile vanished. “You don’t honestly believe that? Mr Spacejock, your computer has been fobbing me off for weeks. You’re months behind with repayments.”

“You mean it was a trick? You’re not giving me any money?”

“I do believe we’re on the right track at last. You see, I’m here to collect back payments on your existing loan.” Vurdi gestured at the robot. “If you’re quick, you can stay out of hospital.”

“I don’t have anything to give.” Hal spread his hands. “It’s been quiet, nobody’s hiring.”

“We must honour our debts, Mr Spacejock. Payment in kind perhaps? A limb or two?” The chair squealed as Vurdi turned his back. “I suggest you stand still, it’ll be quicker that way.”

“Quicker? What –” Hal dodged as Brutus reached for him with hands the size of shovels. “Hey, call it off or –” The threat died in his throat as banana-sized fingers closed around his neck, and a split second later he was flat on his back. The giant machine crouched over him and tried to push him through the cold metal deck, and as the steel claws

tightened on his throat Hal's life flashed before his eyes - a series of heavy landings interspersed with explosions and multiple fractures.

"Is he dead yet?" called Vurdi.

Electric-tainted air blew over Hal's face. "Nearly," growled the robot.

"All right, let go."

The robot hesitated for a moment, then unwrapped its hands and stood up.

"Let's start again, Mr Spacejock." Vurdi lifted the queen from the chessboard and examined the underside. "Where's the money?"

"I told you, I don't have anything."

Vurdi tumbled the chess piece in one hand. "You know, it's just as well your insurance is paid up."

"What are you saying?"

"Imagine if the unthinkable happened to your ship. Garmit would get their money, I would earn my fee and you ... well, you'd get a few lines in the local paper."

"You'll never get away with it!"

"Several of my ex-clients expressed the same opinion." Vurdi shook his head sadly. "Alas, I proved them wrong."

"Look, there is something."

"There always is. How much?"

"No, a guy called this morning with an urgent cargo job."

Vurdi raised one eyebrow. "Why didn't you mention it earlier?"

"What earlier? I opened the door and your robot tried to rip my head off."

"Drama bores me, Mr Spacejock. Give me the details."

"This guy wants me to cover his next pickup. His regular freighter is out of action."

"Most convenient." Vurdi's dark eyes studied Hal's face. "When will this job be completed?"

"I've got twenty-four hours."

"Very well, Brutus will collect the money tomorrow afternoon." Vurdi laid the chess piece on the board and stood. "No need to show me out. Come, Brutus."

Hal jumped as the robot's foot thudded down next to his face. He felt its hands grabbing at his clothing, pulling him up until he was staring into its blood-red eyes. Breath hissed between its wafer-thin lips as hidden fans worked overtime to keep its circuits cool. "I'll be b—"

"Brutus, come!" snapped Vurdi from the airlock.

The robot dropped Hal and left the ship with slow, measured footsteps. As the outer door thudded to, Hal sat up. "Navcom?"

There was a crackle from the console. "Yes, sir?"

"Call Jerling Enterprises."

"The front company for the local crime lord?"

"Yes. Tell them I'll take their cargo job."

"The shipment of stolen goods?"

"That's it."

"But you turned them down!"

Hal rubbed his neck. "I just changed my mind."

CHAPTER 2

On planet Forg, a small crowd had gathered outside the local sky hockey stadium. Forgtown was not a prosperous area - the semi-detached houses were modest and the residents struggled to live within their means. It was unusual to see building work or renovations, and the refurbishment of the decrepit old stadium had been a talking point for months.

Opening day had arrived at last, and light blazed from the new ticket booths, glistening off the gold and silver ribbons stretched across the entrance. There was a lighting rig to one side, a spindly tower festooned with coloured spotlights. Perched on top, a stocky man in baggy jeans was adjusting the largest of these lights, directing an intense white beam onto the centre of the gleaming floor tiles. When he was satisfied, music blared from concealed speakers and the crowd parted to allow a young man in a gold suit onto the impromptu stage. He slid to a halt, threw his head back and raised an oversized microphone to his mouth. "Ladies and gentlemen, we are gathered here today to witness a miracle," he bawled. As he strode up and down the technician struggled to keep the beam on him. "They said it would never happen! They said the people of Forgtown didn't deserve a new stadium!" He gestured at a blank wall. "So who came to your rescue?"

On cue, a huge portrait was projected onto the wall. It showed a middle-aged man with a bristling black moustache, gleaming black hair and a thick cigar gripped in the corner of his mouth. "Mr Walterrrr Jerling!" screamed the young man. He stuck the microphone under his arm and clapped wildly, trying desperately to rev up the crowd.

Off to one side, Jerling took a last puff from his cigar, dropped it on the fresh new tiles and ground it to shreds

under his heel. Then he strode onto the stage and took the microphone. He waved the crowd to silence and began his speech, but nothing came through the speakers. Jerling glared at the young man, who took the microphone and fiddled with it.

"...bloody thing working or it's your job," boomed Jerling's voice, as the microphone was handed back. He recovered quickly. "Thank you for coming," he said, forcing a smile at the crowd of onlookers. It was the usual turnout - young mothers with prams, old ladies clutching oversized handbags and a smattering of unemployed youths with nothing better to do. Impulsively, Jerling decided to cut to page seven. The PR people would moan, but they could splice old footage for the news release. "And so, it gives me great pleasure to open this refurbished stadium, and to wish the Forgtown Rhinos the best of luck for the coming season!"

The crowd clapped politely as Jerling moved to the entrance and snipped the ribbon. "I declare this stadium open!" he said, to further applause.

On the way to his waiting limousine Jerling passed a mother standing by her young son. The boy was looking up at a bunch of coloured balloons tied to the barrier, a wistful look in his eyes. On impulse, Jerling separated one of the balloons from the rest. "Here you are kid, look after it."

The mother beamed at him. "Thank you, Mr Jerling. I'm sure he'll treasure it for life."

Jerling made a casual gesture, indicating that such momentous gifts were easy to bestow. Inside, he felt the warm glow of a deed well done.

"But mum, I wanted the red one," whined the boy.

Jerling turned and strode to the car, ducked inside and sank back in the comfortable upholstery. The door closed and the car drew away from the crowds with a hum of

powerful motors, quickly gathering speed. Inside, Carina Rinoret was sitting primly on the edge of her seat, briefcase on her lap. Her dark brown eyes studied Jerling intently, trying to gauge his mood. She didn't have to wait long.

"Sack that bloody MC," growled Jerling.

"Yes, sir."

"Gold suits and spotlights, what the hell was he thinking? I'm a businessman, not a goddamn pop star." As the car turned onto the highway, Jerling tore the wrapper off a fresh cigar and jammed the tip into the door console. "What happened to the last guy?"

"Fired," said Carina. "You said he was dull."

"And did you see that crowd? Pathetic!" Jerling jammed the lit cigar between his teeth and dragged on it hungrily. "I saw Hinchfig on the news the other day. He had twice the crowd for his stadium, and they were all cheering louder."

"I did suggest a virtual crowd, but you insisted on the real thing."

"That sneaky bastard." Jerling took the cigar from his mouth and stared at her. "Hinchfig fakes his crowds?"

Carina nodded. "He's got a brilliant programmer and a room full of computers. We should have the same."

"Forget it. They're temperamental, highly strung and they keep breaking down." Jerling blew out a cloud of smoke. "I'm not wasting money on computers either."

Discreetly, Carina activated the air purifier. "Real crowds aren't exactly cheap."

"You paid those losers to show up?" Jerling stared at her in surprise. "I thought they were loyal Rhinos supporters!"

"The Rhinos don't have any supporters. They never win."

"Sack all the players and buy some good ones."

"Noted."

Jerling eyed the fast-moving scenery. They were leaving the dreary, run-down part of town, and he could already feel the weight lifting from his shoulders. "I should have charged that kid for the balloon."

"Would you like me to secure its return?"

"I don't give a rat's." Jerling gestured impatiently with his cigar. "Focusing on the small stuff is a beginner's mistake, I've been in this game long enough to know that. Anyway, it's probably blown away by now." He glanced at Carina. "Speaking of small matters, what was that crap on my screen this morning?"

"I don't understand."

"Some memo about the company dental plan. I don't deal with garbage like that. Put someone else onto it."

"Employee benefits are an important aspect of your business."

"They should be bloody glad they've got jobs." Jerling sniffed. "Opening shopping centres, dental plans. You'll have me organising a retirement party next."

"Nonsense, Mr Jerling. You perform a vital function."

"Don't patronise me." Jerling puffed his cigar. "Find me something interesting. Give me something to think about."

"You know what your doctor said, Mr Jerling. He advised against direct involvement in the decision-making process."

"All right, sack the doctor and then find me something interesting."

"I'm sure that won't be necessary." Carina looked inside her briefcase. "There's a batch of equipment due for recycling. I need final approval on the order."

"Recycling? That's the best you can do?"

"It's vital to the health of the company. Turning over equipment is good for staff morale, leads to lower main-

tenance costs and cuts our exposure to taxation.” Carina handed over a bound report. “Here’s the information.”

Jerling sighed as he felt the weight. “In the old days I listened to the facts and made up my mind on the spot. When did all this red tape come in?”

“ Standard corporate governance. Everything by the book.”

“ And a book for everything,” muttered Jerling. He flipped through the pages, glaring at the tiny print. “What is it, anyway?”

“ Depreciation schedule. Every item of equipment in the company, listed by purchase date and accrued tax benefit.”

“ Care to explain that in layman’s terms?”

“ The further you go in the book, the older the equipment. I recommend we dispose of everything after page seventy.”

“ Are you crazy?” Jerling stared at her. “I’m not getting rid of perfectly good equipment.”

“ There’s a tremendous tax advantage if you do.”

Jerling squinted at the page. “Vehicles, ships, computers ... we only just bought some of this stuff!”

“ I’m afraid not. The minimum age is five years, and some items are almost thirty. Take those robots ...”

Jerling groaned. “Not robots. Not openly.”

“ What do you mean?”

“ Do you know what happens when you strip a bunch of robots from a company?”

Carina shook her head.

“ The rest go moody, that’s what. They don’t say anything but their eyes follow you everywhere. Accusing, sad, angry ...” Jerling shook his head. “You have to remove them one by one, send them off on a long-term errand. Then you tell the rest their dear old metal pal was purchased as

a companion for someone's grandma, or to help a sick kid recover."

"Isn't that rather elaborate? They're just machines."

"No, they're machines with brains. Big difference."

"However it's done, this equipment must go. It will save the company thousands."

"Really?"

Carina nodded. "The tax benefits will almost pay for the replacements. Then there's the human element - new equipment is conducive to a happy work environment, people want to be at work and sick leave falls dramatically."

Jerling grunted and handed the report back. "Put a summary on my desk and I'll take a look in the morning."

"You can't leave it too long," warned Carina. "I've negotiated new contracts with several suppliers and they won't hold their prices forever."

Jerling's eyes narrowed. "Don't get ahead of yourself."

"No, Mr Jerling."

The limousine slowed and Jerling glanced out the window. They were travelling along the broad avenue leading to head office, and as they rounded a bend the building came into view. It was an impressive sight - twelve storeys high, with acres of glass and chrome. Across the facade, broad letters spelled out the words 'Jerling Corporation' in glowing red.

After gazing at his building for a moment or two, Jerling turned back to Carina. "What's next?"

Carina hesitated. "One of our senior engineers is retiring tomorrow. They're not sure what to buy him."

"A wreath," muttered Jerling. "Look, that's not what I meant. I'm talking business deals, something hands on." He frowned. "What was it I heard this morning, something about a shipment they're having trouble with?"

"Your staff are very efficient, Mr Jerling. I'm sure they'll handle it."

"Give me the details and I'll tell you whether they're efficient or not."

Suppressing the tiniest of sighs, Carina took out a thin-screen and paged through several memos. "Did they mention Orthagon?"

"No, Seraph."

"That would be the shipment of robot parts."

"Oh joy," sighed Jerling. "Such a step up from company dental. So what's the problem?"

"The shipment is sitting on Seraph, waiting for collection."

"And?"

"The Seraph military are conducting war games - live fire exercises all over the planet. It's been running for a week now, with another fortnight to go." Carina shifted in her seat. "Last time they held manoeuvres on this scale they blasted three cargo freighters by mistake."

"I begin to see the problem."

"None of our people will fly there, it's too risky. And we're not insured against that kind of loss."

"What's the hurry with the parts?"

"We're assembling an order of serving robots for the Emperor's summer palace. He's planning a grand ball and our robots have to be ready on time."

"Can't we get the parts elsewhere?"

Carina shook her head. "There's a shortage."

"Why don't we hire a ship?"

"Who would fly it?"

"One of our old robots, of course." Jerling gestured at the recycling report. "You've already decided they're expendable."

“ Robots can only be co-pilots. You need a human in control. Anyway, we’re still liable for the replacement cost of the vessel if it’s destroyed.”

“ All right, hire a freelancer.”

Carina grimaced. “We tried, but they’re all aware of the war games. Mind you, there was one . . .”

“ Yes?”

“ He was convinced it was a cargo of stolen goods.”

“ You should have put him on to me,” growled Jerling. “I’d have set him straight.”

“ To be honest, I didn’t think he was suitable. His record is terrible.”

“ We all have to start somewhere. Get him on the line.” Jerling tapped his chest. “I’m going to handle this situation myself.”

The car drove towards the tower block’s imposing entrance before veering off at the last minute. It passed the ornate columns and liveried doorman, skirted the side of the building and emerged on a large, flat expanse of concrete where two spaceships could be seen in the distance: graceful white vessels surrounded by maintenance vehicles. There was also a battered wooden office with faded lettering across the front: “Jerling Inc.”

The limo drew up to the small office. Jerling stepped out, slammed the door and leaned through the open window. “Get onto that freelance pilot and put the call through to me here.”

“ Mr Jerling, you have talented staff. This matter can be handled without your intervention.”

“ Listen, do you know what will happen if we disappoint the Emperor? We’ll lose our preferred supplier status, that’s what. The Hinchfigs will pounce, and before you know it they’ll be supplying the Emperor and we’ll be faking

crowds." Jerling banged his fist on the polished metal roof. "You get this clown of a freighter pilot on the line, and you get him now. Understood?"

White-faced, Carina nodded.

As the car drew away, Jerling extracted a worn key from his pocket and unlocked the door to the ramshackle office. Inside, he closed his eyes and took a deep breath, savouring the familiar smells of stale tobacco and warm electronics. There was a plush office awaiting him on the top floor of the main building, but he refused to move into it. Partly because it had no soul, mainly because they wouldn't let him smoke there.

After gazing fondly at the faded sales charts and outdated calendars hanging on the walls, Jerling crossed the wrinkled carpet to his desk. He sat in the snug, familiar chair and snapped his fingers at a squat robot hunched in the corner. As the robot raised a spindly arm and lurched towards him, a satisfied smile crossed Jerling's face. This was the nerve centre of his business, doctors or no doctors.

* * *

Hal was pacing the *Black Gull's* flight deck, ready to put his fist through the nearest wall. "What do you mean, you can't call Jerling back? What do you mean you didn't save his details?"

"I erased the record after you turned the job down."

"So look it up again!"

"We can't afford the search fees." The Navcom hesitated. "Incidentally, it's your move."

"How can you think of a bloody chess game at a time like this?"

"You're only saying that because you're losing."

"The hell I am." Hal strode to the console and stared down at the board, where his white king and a single pawn were surrounded by a complete set of black pieces. "Switch sides?"

"Negative."

Hal sighed. "Isn't there any way you can get hold of Jerling?"

"No."

"At least think about it, all right? I'm going to get something to eat. Call me if you get any ideas." Hal crossed to where a battered metal ladder poked through a circular hole in the floor. He'd just put his foot on the first rung when a chime echoed around the flight deck.

"Inbound call for Mr Spacejock."

"Take it, will you? I can't handle debt collectors right now."

"It's not a debt collector, it's Jerling Enterprises."

"Are you mucking about?"

"No, it's Walter Jerling himself."

"Well don't keep him waiting, you overgrown calculator. Put him on!"

The viewscreen flickered and wavered, and Walter Jerling's head and shoulders appeared. His gaunt face was bathed in green light from the screens set into his desk, and there was a cigar clamped between his teeth. He spotted Hal, removed the cigar and blew out a cloud of smoke. "Hal Spacejock?"

"That's me," said Hal, dropping into his seat. "Listen, I was just —"

"Freelance cargo pilot?"

"Yes. I was —"

"Something wrong with my company? Pay not good enough?"

“ No. I –”

“ I told my staff you’d come round.” Jerling waved his cigar. “The cargo’s on Seraph IV, I want it delivered to my premises on Forg within twenty-four hours. Can you handle that?”

“ Sure.”

Jerling picked a shred of tobacco from his lip. “There’s a couple of things you should know. First, Seraph space control are a bunch of bureaucratic idiots who’ll tie you up for days with their ridiculous paperwork. And we don’t want that, do we?”

“ I guess not,” said Hal.

“ Right, so you’re going to bypass customs. Second, you’ll be landing in a field at night. The pickup is near the equator and there’s a few dwellings, light industry, that kind of thing.”

Hal wondered if his hearing was playing up. “Did you say a field?”

“ You got a problem with that?”

“ Well, er –”

“ Good.” Jerling frowned at the darkened tip of his cigar. “What was the other thing? Oh yes, the landing. I want you to take one of my pilots along. Give him a lift to Seraph.”

“ I thought this job was urgent? If I have to wait for your pilot –”

“No waiting, he’s already there at the spaceport. He was supposed to get a lift with one of my ships, but you can take him instead.” Jerling waved his cigar. “If things get sticky on Seraph he’ll take over the controls.”

“Is he any good?”

“ He works for me, doesn’t he?” Jerling snapped his fingers and a squat robot appeared, holding a short rod with a glowing red tip. Jerling pressed his cigar to the tip, puffed

once or twice to get it going, then waved the robot away. "Look, he's had years of training. Flown everything from a hoverbike to a megafreighter. Believe me, he's a first-class pilot."

Hal felt a surge of relief. A night landing in a field sounded like a recipe for disaster, but with Jerling's pilot it would be easy.

"Right, that's everything covered," said Jerling. "I'll get the pilot over to your ship, and you get my cargo here as quick as you can."

"Hang on, what about payment?" asked Hal.

But the screen was blank.

CHAPTER 3

“No sign of Jerling’s pilot,” said Hal, who was peering through a scratched, yellowed porthole in the *Black Gull*’s airlock. He cupped his hands to the plastic and squinted, but it made little difference. “There could be an army out there and I wouldn’t know it.”

“Why don’t you open the door?” asked the Navcom.

“What, and let Vurdi’s bloody great robot in again? No thanks!” Hal gave up and returned to the flight deck, where he gathered a stained mug and held it under the nozzle of the drinks dispenser. When the machine had finished burping and spluttering he raised his mug to sniff the steaming brown liquid. “Is this tea or coffee?”

“Neither. It’s an infusion of edible fungi.”

“Really?” Hal took a sip and smacked his lips. “It could grow on me.”

“Don’t spill it, or it’ll grow everywhere.”

Hal returned to the chessboard, but his mind was on the upcoming cargo job. He’d never landed in the dark before, especially in a field. What if Jerling’s hot shot pilot didn’t turn up? What if he wasn’t as good as Jerling said he was? What if . . .

“Would you like a hint?” asked the Navcom.

“How can I play if you keep interrupting?” Hal moved one of his pieces at random. “Queen to C6.”

“King’s knight to C6,” said the Navcom. “Warning, checkmate in three moves.”

There was a ringing noise. “About time he turned up,” muttered Hal. As he left his chair he joggled the chessboard with his elbow, scattering pieces all over the deck. “Oops, silly me.”

“ Desperate situations call for desperate measures,” intoned the Navcom.

“ Eh?”

“ Cheats never prosper.”

“ Oh, shut up.”

“ Daily quote mode ... disabled.”

Hal strode into the airlock and waited impatiently as the outer door grated open. To his horror there was a robot standing outside, and he was just about to slam the door in its face when he realised it was half the size of Vurdi's enforcer. Bronze all over, this robot had a squashy furrowed face, a dented torso and mismatched legs splattered with grimy patches of lubricating fluid.

“ What do you want?” demanded Hal, once he'd finished looking it over.

“ My name is XG99,” said the robot, in an even male voice. “Is this the *Black Gull*?”

“ Yeah. Why?”

The robot's arm jerked up. “Mr Jerling sent me. You can call me Clunk.”

Hal stared at the extended hand. “You're the pilot?”

“ Certified pilot.”

“More like certified junk heap,” muttered Hal. “Wait here,” he said loudly, in case the robot was as deaf as it looked. He strode back to the flight deck and leant over the console. “Navcom, get me Jerling. Quick.”

The viewscreen flickered and Jerling's face swam into focus. “This had better be important.”

“ It is. I've got a clapped-out robot on my doorstep claiming he's your pilot.”

“ Clapped out?” Jerling frowned. “Clunk may be mature, but he's in top condition. You'll be perfectly safe in his hands.”

“ But –”

“ Mr Spacejock, if you don’t want Clunk to land your ship you can do it yourself. My cargo must be delivered on time.”

“ But –”

“ Good, I’m glad that’s settled. Now please hurry. I need that cargo and I need it now.” Jerling clicked his fingers and the cigar-lighting robot appeared at his side, rod at the ready. “Cigar,” said Jerling.

The robot raised the rod, bathing his face with a dull red glow.

Jerling shook his head. “Give me a cigar.”

The robot looked at him.

“ Cigar,” said Jerling, jabbing his finger at the robot. “Come on, you stupid tin can. Cigar!”

The robot eyed Jerling’s finger, head on one side, then shrugged and applied the super-heated tip to it. The screen went dark, cutting off an anguished yell of pain.

“ Perfectly safe, eh?” growled Hal. He strode through the airlock and found the robot waiting patiently outside. Without warning, he jabbed his finger at it. “Cigar! Cigar!”

“ Cigar Cigar,” said Clunk, raising his own finger to match. “Cigar!”

Clunk replied in kind, then made a throat-clearing noise. “Can I just say that’s a most unusual greeting?”

“It wasn’t a g reeting,” said Hal, lowering his finger. “I was just checking you weren’t going to light it.”

“ I couldn’t do that,” said the robot. “Impossible.”

“ Governed by the Three Laws?”

“ No, I don’t have any matches.” Clunk craned his neck and tried to look past Hal. “Can we get started? Mr Jerling said this was urgent, and I’d like to familiarise myself with the controls.”

Hal followed the robot into the flight deck, where he found it staring at the console.

“ This a Rigel class freighter, isn’t it?”

“ That’s right,” said Hal.

Clunk grimaced. “I had no idea they were still in service.”

“ My ship’s as good as new,” growled Hal. “And it’s a damn sight better than yours.”

The robot looked puzzled. “But I don’t have a ship.”

“ Exactly.”

Clunk spotted the chess pieces scattered on the deck. “That’s a novel opening move. Who won?”

“ It was a draw,” said the Navcom.

“ You have a pleasant voice. Did you refine it yourself?”

“Do you mind?” interrupted Hal. “If you’ve quite finished chatting up my computer –”

“Why are you drinking roasted mushrooms?” asked Clunk, inspecting the stained mug on the console.

“ Mr Spacejock got ripped off,” said the Navcom. “He thought he was buying coffee. Of course, I’m sure a robot of your intelligence and wisdom –”

“ Not you as well!” Hal turned on the robot. “Down to the hold. Now.”

Clunk gazed at him with warm yellow eyes. “As a pilot, my place is on the flight deck.”

“ As a passenger, your place is in the hold. You can be a pilot later, and only if I need you.”

“ Very well. Which way to the first class section?”

“Don’t be cheeky.” Hal gestured at the rickety ladder protruding from a hole at the rear of the flight deck. “Take the access tube and follow the passage aft. And don’t touch anything.”

Clunk took hold of the ladder, then hesitated. “By the way, what’s your name?”

"Sir," said Hal.

"Your computer called you Mr Spacejock."

"Yes, but you can call me sir."

The robot looked down the tube into the darkness below.

"No lights?"

"Heat sensors."

Clunk descended the ladder, head bobbing as he stepped carefully from one rung to the next. All of a sudden he disappeared, and there was a clatter-bang-thud as he slipped down the steps and landed in a heap at the bottom.

"Mind the loose rung!" called Hal.

There was pause before the robot's amplified voice floated up the access tube. "Next time, perhaps the warning could come a little sooner?"

Hal sat in the pilot's chair, grinning to himself. "Navcom, prepare for take-off."

"Starting engines."

The *Black Gull's* main drives rumbled into life, shaking the flight deck. Lights blinked, rows of data whizzed across the status displays and the console squeaked and rattled with the vibrations.

"Engines started," said the Navcom.

"Do you have to state the bloody obvious?"

"Reporting mode set to . . . brief."

There was a scrape, and Hal looked over his shoulder to see the robot climbing out of the access tube. "Where do you think you're going?"

"It's unsafe down there." Clunk limped to the console, his leg glistening from a fresh leak. "I came back up before I damaged myself further."

"All right, stay here. But no interfering." Hal put his feet up on the console. "Come on, Navcom. Let's go."

“What about clearance from ground control?” asked the computer.

“Screw them.”

Clunk’s eyebrows rose. “Standard take-off procedure involves somewhat more than –”

“I told you to keep quiet.” Hal looked up at the viewscreen, where the words ‘Most Systems Ready’ were showing in ten-inch letters. “Go ahead, Navcom. Take off.”

Clunk gestured at the console. “But the status displays –”

“We fly my way.” Hal glared at the robot. “If you don’t like it, leave.”

The engines roared, drowning the robot’s reply. Several red lights began to flash, and Clunk hurried over to examine them. He stared at Hal with a worried expression. “According to this, all your back-up systems are inoperative.”

“Will you give it a rest?” shouted Hal. “I’m telling you this ship is safe!”

The engine note rose even further and the deck jolted as the ship hovered above the landing pad. Several displays flickered, screens jiggled around in their housings and a whole bank of lights flashed on and off as the engines howled.

“What’s that?” shouted Hal, as a chiming sound rang out, barely audible over the hammering roar.

“Ground Control,” replied the Navcom. “They want us to abort the lift-off.”

“Ignore them.”

“They are most insistent.”

“I don’t care if they say please in three languages. Take off!”

“Cannot comply,” said the Navcom. “Putting them through.”

A loud double chime rang out and a voice blasted from the console. *"Portside calling Black Gull. Portside calling Black Gull. Please respond."*

"This is the *Black Gull*," shouted Hal. "We're busy right now, but if you leave a message—"

"Permission to leave denied. Repeat, permission to leave denied. Stop your engines and report to the Portmaster immediately."

Hal reached for the throttle, but before he could touch it the engines cut out and the ship thumped down on the pad.

"Landing complete," said the Navcom.

Hal sighed. "I'm going to see what these boneheads want. Clunk, you can tidy this place up while I'm gone."

The robot frowned. "You want me to clean?"

"Why not? Don't you know which end of the mop to hold?"

"Portside calling Tiger. Portside calling Tiger. Clearance granted. Dock when ready."

Hal stared at the console. "Is that thing still on?"

"Naturally. You didn't ask me to close it."

"Why didn't you warn me?"

"You changed my reporting mode to brief."

"Don't wait for my say so. Shut it off!"

There was a pop from the speakers. "Connection terminated."

"What did they hear? Did I say anything to upset them?"

"Possibly. Calling them boneheads wasn't very diplomatic."

Hal opened a door beneath the console, pulled out a chunky, chrome-plated blaster and clipped it to his belt.

Clunk's eyebrows rose at the sight. "You only called them names. Surely you won't need that?"

"You haven't been on this planet long, have you?" said Hal grimly.

CHAPTER 4

Hal emerged from the *Black Gull's* airlock, blinking in the sudden light. On the far side of the landing field the sun was setting behind the spaceport's administration block, which shimmered in planet Lamira's late afternoon heat. Clustered around the spaceport buildings were the 'A' class facilities, built for wealthy pilots and their modern, powerful ships. Crews could dine at one of several five-star restaurants, enjoy a dip in the heated swimming pool and purchase duty-free luxuries in the shopping arcade.

Next were the 'B' class facilities, servicing older ships. Their crews had a choice of fast-food joints, but the swimming pool was a little chilly and the corner store only sold a limited range at a healthy markup.

'C' class was a row of concrete pads with a broken vending machine.

Hal's ship was in section Z, which was a disused corner of the field about as close to the amenities as the nearest moon. The area around the *Black Gull* was a graveyard for derelicts, and the landing pads were home to graffiti-splashed wrecks. Some of the rusty hulks seemed familiar, and when Hal looked closer he realised they were Rigel class freighters like his own. One or two were actually in better shape.

There was a rumble overhead, and Hal looked up to see a spark of light rising effortlessly into the sky. He shielded his eyes to watch the ship climbing into orbit, trailing a long, twisting vapour trail, and would have bet a hundred credits *that* pilot didn't have to deal with faulty engines, fuel leaks and junky old robots.

With a sigh, Hal strode down the access ramp, using the thin handrails to guide himself down the wobbly metal

structure. Stepping onto the landing pad, he walked into the open and glanced back at his ship to see whether any bits had fallen off in the night.

The *Black Gull* sat on three stubby landing legs, one at the front and two supporting the rear. A narrow ridge swept back from the pointed nose and finished in a soaring tailplane at the back of the ship, which was adorned with a swooping gull in peeling black paint. Under the tailplane, twin exhaust cones stuck out on either side of the heavy-duty cargo ramp, which was closed and sealed against the squared-off tail.

Hal sighed. The *Gull* could navigate galactic backwaters with relative ease, but it still looked like a cross between a paper dart and a water heater.

Walking the length of the landing pad, he ducked his head to pass under one of the ship's massive exhaust cones. Behind the ship he encountered the blast barrier, a pitted concrete wall protecting the refuelling cluster from exhaust gases. He heard a low humming noise and saw a battered groundcar hovering above the tangled weeds on the opposite side of the pad. Faded green lettering along the side spelled out the reason for the vehicle's presence: 'Lamira Spaceport - Maintenance Division'. Hal's eyebrows rose at the sight - it wasn't like Z section had anything to maintain.

There was a hiss behind the barrier, then a clang of metal on metal. Hal craned his neck and saw a battered grey robot tinkering with one of the fuel pipes. He also saw the familiar blue moulding of a public viewscreen. Lifting the handset from its cradle, he was deliberating which buttons to press when a metallic voice crackled from the speaker.

"Please insert five credits to make a call."

"I don't want to make a call," explained Hal. "I just need transport."

“ Please insert five credits to make a call,” said the speaker again.

“ I don’t have any money!”

“ Please insert five –”

Hal dropped the handset back in the cradle. He considered going back to the *Gull* to borrow the money off Clunk, then discarded the idea. Jerling’s robot didn’t look like he had one credit, let alone five. He also debated walking to the admin block, but the field was thick with weeds and it would be dark before he got there. That left the maintenance vehicle.

The grey robot was trying to loosen a corroded clamp on one of the pipes. There was a replacement clamp on the ground nearby, along with a wide selection of tools which the robot was trying one by one, from the battery-powered wrench to the double-headed screwdriver. None of them had any effect on the stubborn clamp.

“ Excuse me,” said Hal.

The robot looked up. “Good afternoon, sir. I don’t suppose you have a sprocket wrench?”

“ Don’t you mean a socket wrench?”

“ No, I have one of those already.”

“ Sorry, can’t help.” Hal hesitated. “Listen, I don’t suppose I can get a lift to the spaceport?”

“ Unfortunately, no. I can’t carry passengers.”

“ Lend me your car, then.”

“ Are you an employee of the Lamira Spaceport?”

“ Not quite.”

The robot shrugged. “Then you can’t use the vehicle.” Before Hal could argue, it turned back to the fuel pipe and started hitting the clamp with a pair of pliers.

Hal glanced up at his ship. What if he lifted off, thundered across the field and landed in the spaceport car park? Then

he remembered the new ships clustered around the admin block - if he put a scratch on one with the *Gull*, he'd get life.

With no other option, Hal lowered himself into the tall grass and made his way around the landing pad, keeping his head down to avoid being spotted. It was easy going at first, but the undergrowth was thicker beneath the *Black Gull's* nose cone. Serrated leaves tore at his flight suit as he kicked and tugged his way through the tangled weeds, and pendulous flower heads disintegrated with soft popping sounds, spreading clouds of choking pollen.

Hot and tired, his face and hands stained with brown and yellow blotches, Hal was ready to give up when he heard a steady hum through the thick grass. Moments later he was crouched alongside the battered maintenance vehicle, his hair crackling with static from the shimmering anti-gravity field.

Slowly, he raised his head. The grey robot was fifteen metres away, still busy with the fuel cluster. It had its fingers under the corroded clamp and was levering it away from the thick metal pipe with repeated jerks. Suddenly the clamp came free and the robot fell backwards into the weeds, where it was engulfed in thick clouds of pollen.

Hal's grin disappeared when he saw a stream of fuel squirt from the pipe and splash over the struggling robot.

One spark and the *Gull* would be blown into orbit.

The robot struggled to its feet, hurried to the pipe and sealed the leak with a new clamp, getting sprayed with more fuel in the process. While it was busy tightening nuts, Hal put his hands on the groundcar's metal flank and pulled himself in.

The controls were simple enough - a thrust lever for speed and a joystick to steer with. Hal took hold of the joystick

and tried to pull the thrust lever into reverse. It didn't move. Looking closer, he saw an anti-theft bolt locking it in neutral.

Hal drew his gun, aimed at the lock and squeezed the trigger. The blaster fizzed and a ball of energy struck the metal bolt, heating it to a dull glow. Hal glanced round at the robot, but it was still working on the new clamp and hadn't noticed the shot. Twisting the weapon's power knob, he aimed the gun and fired again.

The blaster roared, hurling an energy bolt that splattered the lock into whirling drops of molten metal, punched a hole through the side of the car and vanished into the long grass. There was a shout, and Hal turned to see the robot charging towards him through the weeds. He yanked the thrust lever backwards and the car reversed away from the landing pad with the robot gaining rapidly.

Hal slammed the joystick to the right and pushed the thrust lever forward, swinging the car around and powering away with a lusty roar from the engine. He looked back just as the robot leaped, landing on the rear of the vehicle and grabbing hold with one hand. Hal waggled the joystick, throwing the car from side to side in an effort to cast the robot off, but it stood up and advanced on him with outstretched arms.

Hal rammed the joystick to the left, throwing the car into a series of tight circles. Ground and sky whirled around faster and faster, but still the robot got closer, a determined look on its face. Suddenly it dived towards him. Hal ducked and the robot sailed overhead, landing on the groundcar's stubby bonnet and almost sliding off the front. It recovered and turned quickly, crouching for another leap.

A large shape loomed in Hal's vision. His gaze snapped past the coiled robot and his eyes widened as he saw the landing pad rushing towards them. He yanked back on

the stick to clear the edge, then pushed it forward again as the *Black Gull's* starboard exhaust cone filled his vision. The robot was thrown into the air as the vehicle scraped under the ship, grazed the concrete landing pad and shot out the other side, narrowly missing the front landing leg.

Hal stopped the car and glanced over his shoulder. The ship was rocking gently, but there was no sign of the maintenance robot. He drove to the rear of the ship, where he saw it spread-eagled against the cargo door, emitting sparks and smoke from its cracked and dented body. It twitched and slid down the back of the ship, landing face down on the concrete.

The robot staggered to its feet, one side of its body caved in and with its head at a strange angle. Slowly, it turned to scan the horizon, stopping as it caught sight of Hal. It shuffled towards him, reached the edge of the landing pad and stepped into thin air. Almost in slow motion, it tumbled into the long grass and lay still.

Hal looked around the landing field but there was nobody in sight. After a final glance at the motionless robot, he turned the car towards the distant office block and gunned the motor.

* * *

Clunk dropped the last chess piece into the small wooden box and looked around the flight deck. It didn't look particularly clean, despite his best efforts with a mop, but compared to its previous state it was as sterile as a hospital ward. Satisfied, he approached the console, and a moment's hesitation he sat in the pilot's chair. "Navcom, do you have a business directory?"

" Affirmative."

“Run a search, please. I’d like all your data on a company called Incubots.”

There was a brief pause. “Owned by Redge Muller, Incubots specialises in robot programming and advanced pilot training.”

Clunk looked relieved. “So that’s what Mr Jerling has in store for me! When I questioned him on the subject he was rather evasive.”

“Humans tell lies about the most trivial matters.”

“It’s a programming flaw.” Very gently, Clunk ran a hand over the console. “I’m going to have a ship of my own one day. My lifelong ambition is to ply the space lanes and trade with distant planets.”

“That’s what Mr Spacejock does,” said the Navcom. “He doesn’t seem to like it very much.”

“I would find it most enjoyable.”

“You realise that robots don’t own ships?”

“Then I shall be the first,” said Clunk. “Tell me, do you have a simulation mode?”

“Affirmative.”

“Activate it, please.”

“What difficulty level? Medium, hard or extreme?”

“Hard. I’d like to get a feel for the controls before taxing myself.”

“You’re a little rusty, I assume.”

Clunk frowned. “Are you trying to be funny?”

“It was merely an observation. Tell me, would you like sound effects with your simulation?”

“Yes, make it as realistic as possible.”

“Entering set-up. Please specify parameters.”

“Height two thousand metres, wind fifteen knots from the southeast, ship descending at four hundred metres per minute. Manual override enabled.”

“ Entering simulation mode. Please take the controls.”

Clunk put one hand on the throttle and took the flight stick with the other. With his left eye on the viewscreen and the right scanning the console readouts, he moved the ship into position and set it down dead centre.

“Landing successful. You scored ...one hundred points. Your rating is ... perfect. Your high score is ... number one.”

“Really?” Clunk looked pleased. “By how much?”

“The next high score is ...Mr Spacejock. His best ever result is ...minus nine thousand seven hundred and fifty. Would you like to try again?”

“ No, I'd like a different simulation. Plot a virtual course for planet Aklam.”

“ Cannot comply. I don't have an entry for that planet.”

Clunk sighed. “It's only a simulation. Use random coordinates.”

“ Destination located and locked in.”

“ Start main engines.”

There was a hissing sound from the console speaker. “Main engines started.”

“ Check thrust levels,” said Clunk.

“ Confirmed.”

“ Seal external doors.”

“ Doors sealed.”

“ Initiate take-off.”

“ Increasing thrust,” said the Navcom. “Attitude boosters activated. The ship has cleared the landing pad.”

Clunk sat back and stared through the viewscreen with a faraway look in his deep yellow eyes. He was on his way to Aklam, centre of the mechanised universe, and the fabled planet every robot dreamt about!

* * *

Hal left the maintenance vehicle in the spaceport's outer car park and walked to the admin block. An information kiosk directed him to an elevator, where he pressed the button marked 'Portmaster'. The floor numbers flicked past as the lift dropped further and further underground. He'd expected the Portmaster to have a spacious top-floor office with a view of the landing field, but instead the office seemed to be in the basement. Below the basement, amended Hal, eying the elevator's control panel. He'd passed that already.

The final number lit up and Hal's legs buckled as the elevator came to a sudden stop. The doors swept open and he stepped out into a cool reception area, his nose wrinkling at the damp smell from the bare concrete walls. A young man was sitting behind a reception desk, working at a computer terminal. He noticed Hal, and his earring sparkled as he looked up. "Can I help you sir?"

"I'm here to see the Portmaster."

"Take a seat please." The man turned to his terminal and continued with his work.

There was a pair of armchairs in the corner of the room, arranged around a glass coffee table. Hal sat down, pulled a magazine from a nearby rack and flipped through the wrinkled plastic pages, gazing at lurid adverts for rocket fuel additives, expensive watches and sets of matching luggage. He was about to put the magazine back when an article about exploding robots caught his eye.

Are robots bad for your health?

Government sources say the recent spate of exploding metal men could be linked to the illegal practice of re-marking electronic brains.

The brain unit is the most expensive component of a robot, accounting for nearly two-thirds the total cost of our tin pals. Unscrupulous manufacturers have been salvaging brains from scrapped robots and fitting them to brand new models, forcing these delicate components to run at far greater speeds than they were designed for. In laboratory tests, brain units have burnt out or blown up when subjected to this kind of treatment.

Hal lowered the magazine. It would be just his luck if Jerling's robot had a wonky brain. He resolved to confine it to the hold, whatever creative excuses it came up with. If it did blow up, the shrapnel was less likely to damage vital equipment. Stuffing the magazine back in the rack, Hal pulled out another. It fell open at an article about the latest sitting of the Union Council.

Stay that trigger finger!

The Galactic Council has decreed that robots are to be treated as equals in the eyes of the law. From the beginning of this month, the wilful destruction of a robot is to be treated as murder. In a welcome move, obsolete robots retain their status as third-class citizens, and are therefore exempt from this controversial new law.

Hal tried to remember the maintenance robot. Had it been obsolete, or just old? He jumped as the office door opened and a short, balding man looked out.

"Who the hell are you?" demanded the man, glaring at Hal with hard grey eyes.

"Hal Spacejock, *Black Gull*."

"I'm Portmaster Linten. We need to talk." Linten glanced at the young man behind the desk. "Hold my calls."

"Yes sir."

Linten held the door open. "In here, Spacejock."

Hal followed Linten into a cramped office. A large wooden desk almost filled the room, and the walls were lined with bookcases crammed with journals and magazines. Linten

closed the door and waved Hal into a chair, then walked behind the desk and sat down.

“ Mr Spacejock,” he began, “Lamira is a small planet, far from major trade routes. Our most welcome visitors are those that inject substantial sums of money into our lowly economy.”

Hal noticed an interesting mural on the wall behind Linten, depicting a spaceship landing on a rocky plain under the light of two moons.

“ We also value those visitors whose contributions are more artistic in nature,” said Linten. “They don’t contribute material wealth per se, but they enrich the mental well-being of our citizens with artworks or theatre.”

Hal studied the mural. The rocket was an Alpha class, although the artist had left off an engine to give prominence to the ‘W’ logo of a fast food chain.

“ Finally, we come to those visitors who have absolutely no value to us.” Linten hunched forward, eyeing Hal’s pollen-streaked clothes. “I took the liberty of checking your credit rating, something I should have done before I allowed my staff to refuel that ship of yours. You can’t even pay your landing fees, Mr Spacejock, let alone the rest of your bill. You are a freeloader on a planet where the word free does not apply.”

“But I—”

“Given your circumstances, I’m sure you understand my course of action.”

“ Oh. What’s that?”

“ I’m impounding your ship.”

Now Linten had Hal’s full attention. “Here, you can’t do that!”

“ I just have. And if you don’t settle your bill in seven days I’ll auction your ship and deduct your debts from the proceeds.”

“ But it’s not my ship! I’m paying it off!”

“ I don’t care who it belongs to. It’s here, and it owes me money.”

“ Look, I just got a cargo job. Let me do it and I’ll come back and pay you afterwards.”

Linten snorted. “I stopped believing in the tooth fairy years ago, Mr Spacejock.”

“ It’s true! I’m shifting a cargo of parts for this guy called Jerling. His robot’s aboard my ship now.” Hal had a thought. “Can I call him?”

“ Be my guest,” said Linten, sliding his commset across the desk.

Hal tapped out the *Black Gull’s* registration code. There was a crackle of static and a sultry female voice came out of the speaker. “Hi, folks. The captain and I are busy right now, but if you leave a message he’ll get back to you as soon as we’re done.”

Linten raised one eyebrow.

Hal reddened. “Previous owner. Must change it.”

* * *

“ Simulation suspended. Incoming message.”

The woolly clouds of Aklam faded from Clunk’s vision.

“I’m sorry?”

“ Incoming message.”

“ Are we meant to answer it?”

“ It’s Mr Spacejock,” said the Navcom.

Clunk sat up straight. “Please open the connection.”

“ Hey, robot!” called Hal.

" Yes, sir?"

" Call Jerling and get me a loan. I need three hundred credits for landing fees and fuel."

" I don't think he'll lend you any money," said Clunk doubtfully.

" I don't care what you think. If he doesn't come through I'll lose my ship and his precious cargo will be stranded forever."

" Message understood," said Clunk. There was a burst of static and the speaker went dead. "Navcom, please put me through to Mr Jerling."

" Connection activated." The viewscreen flickered and fizzed, and Jerling appeared. He took a cigar from his mouth and waved at the smoke with a bandaged hand.

" Mr Jerling! Whatever happened to your hand?"

" It's nothing," said Jerling, moving it out of sight below the desk. "You're not calling to inquire about my health, so let's have it."

" Mr Spacejock was summoned to the Portmaster's office about an unpaid fuel bill."

" I see."

" He asked me to call you," said Clunk.

" And?"

" He wants three hundred credits or he'll lose his ship."

" Is that so?"

" Yes. And if you don't come through with the cash, he'll strand your precious cargo forever."

Jerling yanked the cigar from his mouth. "He said that?"

Clunk paused to replay the call from Hal. "That's the gist of it."

A plume of brown smoke drifted across the screen. "You tell Spacejock something from me. If he doesn't deliver

my cargo on time I'll have him arrested, tortured and shot. Twice."

" Understood."

" Goddamn freelancers," said Jerling, sticking the cigar into the corner of his mouth. "Nothing but trouble."

Clunk remembered something. "Oh, Mr Jerling. I found out about Incubots!"

Jerling breathed in sharply, almost swallowing his cigar.

" Are you all right?" asked Clunk in alarm, as his boss coughed and spluttered.

Jerling held up his bandaged hand. "Important meeting, Clunk. Gotta go."

The screen fizzed and went blank, and then more smoke drifted past. Clunk raised a hand and waved it gently, then glanced over his shoulder. The flight deck was filling with haze, and there was a faint noise which seemed to be coming from the airlock. When he turned up the gain in his audio circuit the gentle murmur became a crackling roar.

Fire!

Clunk ran into the airlock. As the outer door slid open, thick brown smoke poured into the ship. He walked onto the landing platform, flapping his hands in a vain attempt to clear the air, and through a break in the swirling smoke he saw the source - flames were tearing through the dry grass near the *Black Gull's* stern!

Clunk ran back into the flight deck, his feet thudding on the metal deck. "Navcom, call Mr Spacejock. We have an emergency!"

* * *

End of Sample
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