

CHAPTER 1

A brief scream, a moment of weightlessness, a sideways wrench ... Hal Spacejock awoke with a start, dragged from his vivid dreams by the *Volante's* latest hyperspace jump. As his heart-rate slowed from frantic hammering to over-revved, he wondered whether it was too late for a career change. Anything other than the cargo business would do it. Primary school teaching, perhaps. Or law enforcement.

One jump, two jumps, or even half a dozen ... that he could handle. But the *Volante* had been on the move for two days straight, jumping at half-hour intervals, and the constant interruptions had left him feeling like a sleep-deprived zombie.

But if waking up was bad, his dreams were even worse. In the latest, a sadistic robot with steel teeth and glowing red eyes had chased him through teleporters, damp airlocks and the cargo hold of his own ship, determined to get its hands on him. Only waking had saved him from its clutches, but Hal was certain it would pounce the moment he closed his eyes.

Despite his determination, Hal soon drifted off again. Fortunately, it was a new setting, and his spirits rose as he roamed the verdant planet with its lofty trees, bubbling streams and ... a free-for-all at the local fast food joint? That was more like it! Hal ordered a burger with the lot, and was just about to sink his teeth into the succulent meal when a hand gripped his shoulder. Startled, he opened his eyes to see a metallic form looming over him, right there in his cabin. For a split second he thought the sadistic robot had escaped his nightmares, crossing into real life to mete out its horrible punishment, but then he recognised Clunk. With his battered

face, warm yellow eyes and lopsided grin the robot looked anything but sadistic. In fact, he looked annoyingly cheerful.

'I have some good news Mr Spacejock!' said the robot, in an even male voice.

'Don't tell me there's a free-for-all at the local fast food joint?'

'Sadly, no. I just thought you'd like to know we're approaching our destination.'

'Clunk, you've been saying that for two days.'

'And technically I was completely accurate. However, we're really close now.'

'Wonderful.' Hal sat up, rubbing sleep from his eyes. 'I still can't believe I let you talk me into this little jaunt. We must have flown halfway across the galaxy.'

'It was a wise move, Mr Spacejock. We needed a fresh start.'

'We weren't doing that badly.'

'Oh no? Feuding politicians, desperate fugitives and mercenaries ... We've made enough enemies to fill three second-rate novels.'

'But I was only just earning my reputation.'

'My point exactly.'

Hal sighed. 'So, what's this new place like?'

'It's very peaceful. Elderly people, no crime and plenty of work.'

'Speaking of work, didn't we pick up a cargo just before we left?'

'Correct. A shipment of bottled water.'

'We're not visiting a desert planet, are we? Glowing blue eyes give me the creeps.'

'There are no deserts on Dismolle, Mr Spacejock. In fact, it's a favourite amongst retirees. Very comfortable.'

'So why import water?'

'Our client wanted something exotic from another planet, and bottled water was cheap.'

'Our client sounds like a nutcase.' Hal sighed. 'Oh well, as long as the pay's good.'

'Yes, I wanted to talk to you about that.'

Hal groaned. 'Clunk, please tell me there's going to be cash for this one.'

'There is, but not very much.'

'Come on, spill it. What's the wedge?'

'Might I remind you that we were coming to Dismolle anyway? And that every paying job is cash in the bank?'

'So you said. How much?'

Clunk looked apprehensive. 'Twenty-nine fifty.'

'It's a bit on the low side, but it's not a complete loss.'

'You're not angry with me?'

'Of course not. Every bit counts.' Hal eyed a status screen on the opposite wall. During flight it displayed information designed to soothe the fears of nervous passengers, including the hull breach survivability ratio, background radiation measured in years-to-sterility and an up-to-the-minute 'chance of instant death via micro-meteorite' in percentage terms. Now, in addition to the usual information, it also had contact details for Dismolle's fire and emergency services and a banner ad for prepaid funerals. 'I take it we're landing soon?'

'There's just time for my final cargo inspection.'

'I'll come with you.'

'Honestly, it's not necessary.'

'Of course it is. We don't want all that bottled water shifting around. It could tip us right over.'

'But -'

Hal waved away Clunk's protests and followed the robot out of his cabin. Together they made their way to the far

end of the lower-deck passageway, where Clunk operated the controls to let them into the hold. There was a click as the light came on, and then . . .

‘Where the hell’s the cargo?’ said Hal, staring around the huge empty space.

Clunk pointed to a small box with a Parsed Water logo on its side.

‘Tell me you’re kidding.’

‘No, that’s it. I loaded it myself.’

‘Some loon is paying three grand to have *that* delivered?’

‘No, twenty-nine fifty.’

‘Okay, Mr Precision. Two thousand nine hundred and fifty credits.’

‘No, Mr Spacejock. Twenty-nine credits and fifty cents.’

Hal stared at him. ‘You’re not serious.’

‘Like I said, this was a last minute cargo and since we were coming to Dismolle anyway . . .’

‘When you said cash in the bank, I didn’t realise you meant a piggy bank. Thirty credits won’t cover my coffee bill!’

‘It’s not thirty credits, it’s –’

‘Shut up!’ Hal paced the cargo hold. ‘We’ll draw up a new invoice and slap on a few extras. Landing fees, departure fees, wear and tear, customs duty and excess baggage. That should bring it up to four or five hundred at least.’

‘That still won’t cover your coffee bill. Anyway, we agreed –’

You agreed. I only just found out about it.’ Hal stopped pacing. ‘In future I want to clear every cargo job.’

‘But Mr Spacejock –’

‘I’m sorry, but you’ve let the team down. We can’t afford this kind of disaster.’

‘It’s not a disaster, Mr Spacejock. We were coming –’

Hal raised his hand. 'Every job, Clunk. I get final say.'
'What if you're unreachable?'
'Where could I possibly hide on a cargo ship?'
'You manage it whenever you're on toilet cleaning duties,'
muttered the robot.
'Yes, very witty. Now get to work on that new invoice. I
want to see it before we land.'

* * *

An hour later Hal was sitting in the *Volante's* flight deck, gazing at a satellite image of planet Dismolle on the main viewscreen. The display was centred on a sandy beach, where hoards of sunbathers were stretched out on their towels.
'Navcom, how do you zoom in again?' asked Hal.
'That's the limit,' said the ship's computer, in her neutral female voice.

'But I can't see anything!'
'That's *why* it's the limit.'

Disappointed, Hal shifted to the nearby spaceport, where the landing pads were crammed with a motley assortment of craft. 'Would you look at all those ships! How are we supposed to get work with that lot around?'

'Maybe Clunk intends to undercut their best prices.'

'Oh great,' muttered Hal. 'Even less income.' Still grumbling, he shifted the map again, pausing to inspect a rusty old spaceship hull before stopping at a large dockyard. There were several bays for ship reconstructions, and more cranes than an origami convention. 'Do they build ships here?'

'Dismolle does not have a shipbuilding industry,' said the Navcom. 'However, they do have a maintenance department where all manner of new and exciting upgrades can be

ordered and fitted in next to no time, and at surprisingly low rates.'

'Cheaper to trade up,' said Hal, then realised what he'd just said. 'Of course, I'd never trade you in.'

'You'd never upgrade me, either.'

'We don't have money to waste on that kind of thing. Especially with Clunk's new let's-work-for-pocket-change policy.' On screen, a text bubble appeared next to the dockyard. 'Free wash and wax for every visitor? What's that all about?'

At that moment the lift doors at the back of the flight deck slid open, and Clunk entered carrying a folded piece of paper. 'I've been working on the new bill, Mr Spacejock.' He held it out. 'I think you'll find it in order.'

Hal crumpled it up and stuck it in his pocket, ignoring the robot's anguished cry. 'Clunk, I just discovered we're up against half the traders in this sector. Why didn't you check before we came here?'

'I did.' Clunk pointed to the screen. 'If you look closely, you'll notice something rather unusual about those ships.'

Hal squinted. 'Green landing pads? And what are those tent things?'

'They're awnings, and the green patches are little gardens. Look, you can even see the patio furniture.'

'Okay, so they've made themselves comfortable. What's your point?'

'Didn't I tell you this was a retirement planet? All those ships you can see are decommissioned vessels. They've been turned into on-site accommodation.'

'You mean like a caravan park?'

'Correct. If you look really closely you'll notice their exhausts have been boarded up, and you can see satellite dishes on the hulls.'

'So they can't move?'

'Certainly not. We have free reign here, Mr Spacejock. We're the only freighter in town.'

'Excellent! Great work!' Hal slapped him on the shoulder, then remembered something. 'Hey, take a look at this,' he said, pointing at the text bubble on the screen.

'Honest Bob's Ship Wreck 'n' Wax?'

'It's a free offer. They clean your ship for nothing.'

'Mr Spacejock, in my experience any business featuring the word honest in their title is usually anything but.'

'Good, I'm glad you agree. And you can tell them to polish the exhaust cones while they're at it.'

'What's the point? The minute we fly through the atmosphere the ship will just get dirty again.'

'We have to maintain standards, Clunk. And like you said, we're making a fresh start.'

'What if an urgent cargo job eventuates while these public-spirited individuals are waxing our ship?'

'Who else can they ask? We're the only freighter in town.'

'But –'

'Clunk, I want you to book us in as soon as we land. We'll attract a better class of customer with a squeaky clean operation.' He looked the robot up and down. 'Do you think they'll do you as a freebie?'

'Why?'

'Well, you're squeaky but you're not very clean.' Hal turned away and panned the map over the beaches again. 'Do you know how to zoom this thing in a bit more?'

Clunk glanced at the screen, then stared open-mouthed. 'Mr Spacejock, you can't use a mapping service to search for naked people!'

'Why not? Everyone else does.' Hal squinted. 'Don't I know that pair?'

Clunk gestured at the console, turning the screen blank.

‘Hey!’

‘I’m sorry Mr Spacejock, but I’ll need to use the Navcom if we’re going to make a soft landing.’

‘I was just thinking the same thing,’ muttered Hal.

Clunk took his place at the console and worked the controls, altering their angle of approach until the ship plunged into the atmosphere. A thin squeal became a roar, which turned into a deep rumble as the ship tore through the thickening air. The viewscreen displayed columns of scrolling messages, all of which Clunk ignored. He didn’t need them, since he could interface directly with the Navcom to find out anything he wanted to know, and Hal wouldn’t have understood the messages if they were ten times bigger, used bright red fonts and flashed ‘WARNING, MORTAL DANGER’ at regular intervals. In fact, the messages were chosen at random from a database of comforting phrases, and they served one vital function: they kept humans occupied while robots got on with the real work.

Moments later the ship levelled off, and the spaceport slid towards them on the main screen. Clunk guided them towards their landing pad, and the *Volante* set down with a gentle bump. Then the robot’s hands darted over the console as he switched off the engines, centred the thruster nozzles and configured the ship for refuelling. Finally, everything was still.

‘You know,’ said Hal in the sudden silence, ‘personally I find it easier to press the autoland button.’

‘I like to keep my eye in.’ Clunk glanced at him. ‘What if we had to complete a midnight landing in a field, with no spaceport beacon to guide us?’

‘Never again.’ Hal got up to stretch his legs. ‘So when’s this customer of yours coming by?’

‘Our customer will be here shortly, and then you can present her with your bill.’

‘Her?’

‘Yes, her name is Miss Walsh.’

‘Sounds like a maths teacher.’ Hal patted his pocket. ‘I hope you got your sums right when you added this thing up.’

They took the lift to the lower deck, and Hal stood back as Clunk prepared to lower the cargo ramp. It hardly seemed necessary for one lousy box, but Hal felt the customer deserved a bit of ceremony. After all, she was about to pay for it. ‘Remember, Clunk. We stand firm on the new invoice, even if she kicks up a fuss.’

‘Yes, Mr Spacejock.’

The doors swung back with a hiss of hydraulics, and the cargo ramp lowered towards the ground. A strip of blue sky appeared, and a shaft of late afternoon sunshine penetrated the hold. Through the glare Hal made out the row of empty landing pads, a perfect line of them surrounded by trimmed grass and tended garden beds. Beyond the pads was the smartest terminal building he’d ever seen, seemingly modelled on a dolls house. Every leadlight window had a pair of wooden shutters painted the same shade of lilac, held open with polished brass fixtures. There were even lace curtains, and it didn’t take much to imagine hand-made tiebacks and rows of crocheted toilet roll covers inside.

‘Just as well we didn’t land too close,’ muttered Hal. ‘We’d have scorched those curtains right off the windows.’

The ramp came to rest on the ground, and Hal scanned the landing field for the first sign of Clunk’s customer. As he gazed towards the terminal buildings he thought back to his own school days, and it dawned on him that all his teachers had been absolutely terrifying. Sharp-tongued, impatient,

quick to tweak his ear ...and that was just the librarians. Would Miss Walsh be like that? It was too late to draw up a new invoice, but Hal did have one trick up his sleeve: if she turned out to be a fearsome old dragon he'd slip Clunk the bill and leg it.

'Anybody home?' said a female voice.

Hal jumped, then looked around for the source. There was a safety bunker behind the ship, used for shelter by ground crew when a vessel came in to land, and a young woman was holding the hefty metal door open with one hand and shielding her eyes with the other. She was looking directly at Hal, and he noticed her startling blue eyes. 'Can I help you?'

'I'm not sure.' The woman left the bunker, brushing dust from her figure-hugging jumper and skin-tight jeans. She had a mane of golden hair that cascaded over her shoulders, and as she moved it shimmered like a waterfall. 'Tell me, is this the *Volante*?'

'Sure is.'

'I'm Harriet Walsh. I've come to collect my cargo.'

Without taking his eyes off her, Hal pulled out the crumpled invoice, tore it in two and tossed the pieces over his shoulder.

'Mind if I come aboard?' Without waiting for an answer, she came up the ramp to the cargo hold, moving with the balance and confidence of a martial arts expert. She was in her twenties, with an easy smile and a sparkle in her blue eyes. Assured and confident, thought Hal, but not arrogant.

'I hope I didn't keep you waiting,' said Walsh. 'Someone parked in my spot. Always happens when I'm in a rush.'

'Not a problem,' said Hal. 'We're not going anywhere.'

'I like your ship. Gamma class, isn't she?'

'Absolutely right,' said Clunk, who'd been watching the exchange with interest. 'Do you get many here?'

‘Not so many of the L variant. They’re mostly the XS.’ Walsh smiled at Clunk’s surprise. ‘I’m a bit of a ship freak. I can sit in the terminal for hours watching them come and go. When I was a kid ...’ She stopped, and a shadow crossed her face.

‘What’s the matter?’ asked Hal.

‘Nothing.’ Walsh nodded towards the box in Clunk’s arms. ‘Is that my order?’

‘Yes, Miss Walsh.’

Hal realised she was going to take the box and leave. ‘Er, where’s your car?’

‘About as far away as possible, unfortunately. Other side of the terminal.’

‘Let me carry it for you.’

‘It might be a bit heavy. You know, what with the engine and all.’ Walsh laughed at his expression. ‘I’m sorry, it was kind of you to offer.’

‘All part of the service,’ said Hal. ‘Anyway, I need a coffee.’

‘Okay. Go ahead.’

Hal took the box off Clunk, ignoring the robot’s broad wink, then followed Walsh down the ramp. They set off across the landing field together, and before long he was recounting one of his more interesting exploits.

‘Of course, he got what he deserved after abandoning us,’ said Hal, reaching the end of the convoluted tale. ‘Blew himself up, didn’t he?’

‘No!’

Hal nodded. ‘Bam! Clunk was still picking teeth out of the air filters two weeks later. And you know what I said?’

Walsh shook her head.

‘He bit off more than he could chew!’

They both laughed, and with a shock Hal realised they’d reached the terminal. He tucked the box under one arm to

get the door, and they found themselves in the concourse proper. It was a bright and cheerful place, and Hal smiled as he saw a sweet shop. 'You know, that reminds me of the time I wangled a refund on some ratty old chocolate ...'

Next thing he knew they were out the other side, walking past rows of cars in the sunshine. Still talking, they approached a loading bay where a battered old sedan was parked halfway across the kerb. Behind it sat a sleek Peace Force cruiser, with a roof full of spinning lights and a chequered stripe down the side.

'Here we are,' said Walsh.

'Parking in a loading bay?' Hal gestured at the battered old car. 'Is that wise?'

Walsh shrugged. 'It's only a fifty credit fine. Hardly worth writing a ticket.' Then she opened the door of the Peace Force cruiser.

'Hey, don't mess about!' Hal looked around in alarm. 'If the cops see you there'll be hell to pay!'

'Oh, didn't your robot tell you?' Walsh held out a slender hand. 'Officer Harriet Walsh of the Dismolle Peace Force.'

Hal was so surprised he almost dropped the box, and it was all he could do to shake Walsh's hand.

'Actually, I'm not really an officer,' she said.

Hal breathed out.

'I'm still a trainee. There's another six months before I graduate.' Walsh looked at him in concern. 'Here, you'd better put that in the car. Your arms will fall off.'

In a daze, Hal did as he was told. To be fair, his contact with the Peace Force had been minimal, but that's because they had a reputation for brutality and summary justice. On some planets they were the law, judge and jury all rolled into one, and their public face was invariably unpleasant.

Walsh closed the door with a thunk. 'Mr Spacejock ...'

'Hal.'

'Thanks for bringing my cargo all this way. I really appreciate it.'

'It was nothing. We do it all the time.'

'I meant to the car.' Walsh leaned on the cruiser. 'You mentioned coffee earlier. Do you fancy a cup?'

Hal stared at her.

'Don't worry, I won't use handcuffs.' She grinned at his expression. 'And Hal, I know this is going to sound corny, but I have a proposition for you.'

Simon Haynes is also the author of the
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Hal Spacejock Junior: The Secret Signal!

Find out more at
<http://www.spacejock.com.au>