

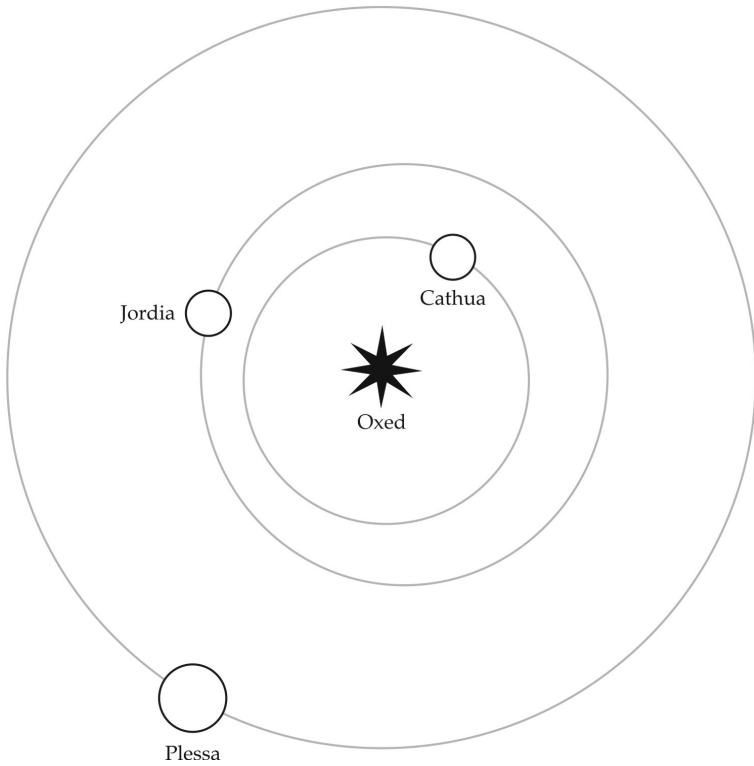
## **Hal Spacejock: Just Desserts**

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# The Oxed star system



# Chapter One

The *Volante*'s engines roared as the ship descended towards Cathua, one of three inhabited planets in the Oxed system. In the flight deck, Hal Spacejock was paying as much attention to the coffee mug balanced amongst the instruments as he was to the viewscreen displaying their approach. He could survive without watching the landing, but he only had one mug.

The screen changed suddenly, and in between the sponsor logos and pop-ups Hal could just make out the mottled blue surface of Cathua. As they got closer the oceans and continents gave way to a patchwork of contrasting squares, but the popups and banner ads didn't give way to anything — they just multiplied.

'You can tell it's a garden planet,' said an even, male voice. 'They grow produce in those fields.'

Hal glanced at the battered bronze robot sitting to his right. 'With advice like that I can see why I keep you around. Clunk the co-pilot, useless data on demand.'

'Would you rather I set us down in the ocean?'

'What, again?' Hal gathered his mug and made his way to the rear of the flight deck, where a coffee maker sat in pride of place. It was a huge, chrome-plated model bristling with spouts, and the control panel was more complicated than the one Clunk was using to fly the ship. 'You keep your eyes on the screen,' said Hal, as Clunk turned to watch. 'You're supposed to be navigating.'

'True, but I don't want to miss the fun.'

Hal patted the machine. 'You're just miffed because I installed it myself.'

'Not miffed. Worried.'

Hal turned his back on the robot and programmed the machine for a white coffee. It gurgled for a moment or two, then filled the mug with orange foam.

'Ask for orange mucus and it might give you a coffee,' said Clunk helpfully.

Hal emptied his mug and tried again. This time he got yellow goo with blue sprinklies.

Clunk tried not to smile. 'Would you like me to calibrate it?'

'Shut up and land the ship.' Hal tried a third time and got something that looked just like coffee. Unfortunately it tasted just like bleach.

There was a snort from the console, but by the time Hal had finished gagging and spluttering, Clunk was feigning interest in the viewscreen. There was a grey spot on the map now, a patch which grew steadily into a linked cluster of landing pads and buildings. A flashing green cross tracked one of the landing pads, which was marked with the word 'Volante' and ringed with three pulsing circles. 'That's ours,' said Clunk, pointing it out in case Hal had missed the clues. 'The cargo should be waiting for us.'

'It's fresh food, right?'

'Correct.'

Hal rubbed his hands together. 'I told you that stasis controller was a good idea.'

‘And I still say it’s unproven technology. Freezing time is a complex process, Mr Spacejock. If anything goes wrong —’

‘Jimmy Bent gave me a three month guarantee. Everything’s covered.’

‘That’s Bent Jimmy, and the only guarantee where he’s concerned is that the goods are stolen.’

‘Get away. Next you’ll be saying he gave me change in forged credits.’

‘You took change from Bent Jimmy?’

‘He said he couldn’t break a thousand.’

Clunk sighed.

‘Hey, no sweat. I’ll pass them off on someone else.’

‘What about the controller?’

‘If it fails we lose someone’s lunch order. Big deal.’

‘It *is* a big deal. This cargo is worth half a million credits.’

Hal almost dropped his mug. ‘How come?’

‘Beef from hand-reared cattle, organic vegetables from hand-sorted seed ... it’s very, very expensive. Worse, they’re paying us a pittance to carry it.’

‘Six thousand credits isn’t bad.’

‘After fuel and costs we’ll make about five hundred.’

‘There’s no loss in a profit.’

‘Maybe not, but it’s going to take another seventy-six profits like this one to pay for your controller.’

‘Don’t worry yourself. Once word gets around we’ll be fighting off customers.’

‘Given our record, I think you mean *with*,’ said Clunk.

‘All right, Mr Negative. You fly the ship and I’ll book the jobs.’

'I'd be only too happy with that.' Clunk turned back to the screen, where the landing pad was growing rapidly. 'Speaking of flying, we're about to set down. You'd better drink up.'

Hal made a few slurping noises as he pretended to drink his coffee, then dumped the mug and plonked himself down in the pilot's chair. 'All right, hit it.'

The engine note changed, and Hal's weight increased sharply before the ship's artificial gravity compensated. A few moments later there was a gentle bump and the engines throttled back.

'Landing fees deducted,' said the Navcom.

'Welcome to Cathua,' said Hal drily.

'Arrival tax paid. Oxygen excise remitted. Ground clearance fee debited. Bank charges —'

'All right, enough of that.' Hal frowned. 'You know, every time we land I feel like ten thousand ants are nibbling me to death.'

'Would you like the ship fumigated?'

'Don't talk to me about fumigations,' muttered Hal. He glanced at the airlock. 'I could use a breather. How's the atmosphere?'

Clunk sniffed. 'Traces of burnt insulation, caffeine and a lot of dust.'

'Outside,' said Hal. 'I meant outside.'

'Ah.' Clunk checked the console. 'Petrochemicals, carcinogens and temperature of four hundred and seventy-five degrees Celsius.'

'Is that safe?'

'Safe?' Clunk shook his head. 'It's like a crematorium without the bricks.'

'Are you sure about that? I mean, people do live here?'

'Certainly.'

'Where did the reading come from?'

'This particular sensor is near the starboard thruster.'

'How near?'

Clunk turned to the console and checked. 'Very.'

'And the engines are off?'

'Ah.' The robot threw a switch. 'Now they are.'

'And the atmosphere?'

'Twenty-five degrees, oxygen normal. It's safe to go out.'

Hal got up and entered the airlock. The outer door opened and he dragged in a couple of lungfuls, then gagged on the stale, oily taste.

'That's the petrochemicals and carcinogens,' said Clunk, who'd followed him into the airlock. 'They don't use clean energy sources here.'

Hal rubbed his watering eyes as he took in the landing field, which was ringed by derelict warehouses, run-down factories and boarded-up shops. The spaceport terminal was a two-storey building with a tall, arched roof and walls of tinted glass, and while it looked impressive a closer inspection revealed broken panes and a mad scramble of overlapping graffiti. 'We should never have come here, Clunk. It's a dump.'

'There wasn't another food job within twelve parsecs.'

'That far?'

'Long,' corrected the robot.

Hal frowned. 'I thought a parsec was a measure of distance.'

'It was, once. The meaning was altered some time ago.'

'Bloody revisionists.'

'There's the cargo,' said Clunk, pointing towards the rear of the ship, where a column of delivery trucks was lined up ready to disgorge their contents. Their flanks were plastered with brand names and cheesy logos: H. Turo Hydroponics, Dave Gornov Pies and R. Soles Quality Smallgoods.

'Makes me hungry just looking at them,' said Hal.

'We've got food.'

'Sure, if you like frozen crap.'

'The autochef doesn't serve frozen —'

'Right. It warms it up first.' Hal pointed at the terminal. 'I'm going to find something to eat. Can you supervise the loading?'

'I thought you were handling customers from now on?'

'That's after this job,' said Hal, stepping onto the ramp. 'You can't expect me to work on an empty stomach.' Ignoring the robot's protests he strode down to the landing field and made for the spaceport terminal.

\* \* \*

Clunk watched Hal go with mixed feelings. He was annoyed at being left to do the work on his own, but also pleased to be free of interference. The human meant well, but loading would take half the time without him.

He made his way to the cargo hold and operated the controls, lowering the ramp until it was level with the floor. Just outside, almost within arms reach, there was a rugged little freighter with a rust-streaked hull. Clunk pressed his lips together at the sight. A huge empty landing field, and ground control had to set them down

right next to a dented old bomb like that. If they so much as scuffed the *Volante's* paint ...

The first driver reversed his truck up and a platform slid out to meet the *Volante's* ramp. Then, the entire cargo emerged in a block: silver crates stacked five high, three rows across and half a dozen deep. They moved across the platform and rode onto the ramp, rumbling past Clunk and vanishing smoothly into the hold as the truck drove away and another took its place.

Clunk leaned against the doorway and watched the *Volante's* intelligent floor dividing the cargo and moving it around the hold, filling the available space quickly and efficiently. Despite his misgivings, it really looked like the job was going to work out, even if the profit was only small. He'd been critical of Mr Spacejock's stasis controller, but if he was honest with himself he had to admit that deep down his objections stemmed from a fear of newfangled machinery. The stasis controller wasn't a direct threat to his role aboard the ship, but surely it was only a matter of time before some other piece of equipment came along to replace him.

\* \* \*

The spaceport concourse had been grand once, but that was long, long ago. The marble flooring was stained and dusty, and the ticket counters were staffed by nothing more than fading hopes. There were boarded-up kiosks reminiscent of ornate crypts, and Hal passed one empty vending machine after another, their fascias faded and peeling, their contents long since excreted.

He'd almost given up hope when he spotted a tatty wooden sign protruding from the worn brickwork. It was a confectionary shop, and Hal decided a couple of choccy bars would go down a treat.

The door opened reluctantly, admitting him to an unlit room the size of a large cupboard. There was a counter just ahead of him, with a customer service bell fixed to a cracked wooden base. Behind the counter, a wall of uneven shelves overflowed with faded boxes, their once-garish logos reduced to sepia by whatever sunlight managed to sneak through the grimy windows.

Hal stepped up to the counter and reached for the bell, but before he could use it a door creaked open, admitting a faceless serving droid. 'Good evening, sir,' it said, in a poorly synthesised male voice. 'What can I do you for?'

'Do you carry Tastee chocolate bars?'

The droid gestured towards the shelves. 'All our products are tasty, sir.'

'Yeah, twenty years ago,' muttered Hal, eyeing the dusty cartons. He raised his voice. 'I meant the Tastee brand. You know, "Munch after lunch"?''

The droid put a finger to where its lips would have been. Lacking a mouth, the gesture failed to evoke the genteel air its programmers had strived for. 'I believe we may have some out the back. Wait a while, I shall return momentarily.'

Hal glanced through the dirty window and saw a wasteland dotted with rusty junk and weeds. It was almost dark, and for all he knew a gang of thugs was sizing him up at that very moment, working out where to dump his body.

The droid came back, brushing dust and rat droppings from a battered cardboard box. 'Here you are, sir! The last one.'

'It looks like the *first* one. Ever.'

'This is a fine product, sir. Tastee bars age well.'

Hal sighed. 'How much?'

'Thirty-seven credits.'

'What, for one Tastee bar?'

'No, for the whole box.'

'I don't want a box, I just want a couple.'

'But we only sell bulk, sir. We're a wholesale company.'

'Wholesale?' Hal stared. 'What are you doing in a passenger terminal?'

'The rent's cheap.'

'Whatever you're paying, it's too much.' Hal leaned across the counter. 'Listen, sell me a couple of bars and I'll pay double for them. Okay?'

'I can't break the pack, sir. Doing so would render it unsaleable.'

'It's unsaleable now.'

'Retail outlets won't buy open packs.'

Hal waved at the shelves. 'They won't buy this mouldy old crap, whether it's open or not!'

The droid hung its head. 'I know it's not much, but it's all we have. My owner isn't well, and —'

'I'm sorry,' muttered Hal. 'I'm sure it's not all mouldy.' Suddenly a thought zipped into his head like a double-speed Tastee bar jingle. 'Listen, did I mention I was thinking of opening a sweet shop?'

The droid perked up. 'Really?'

'Oh yes. I'm, er, doing market research. Trying to decide which products to stock.'

'Now that I can help you with.' The droid set the Tastees on the counter, turned to the shelf and began pulling down boxes. 'These are my favourites,' it confided, sliding a black box towards Hal. 'Maya Swell aniseed balls.' It ripped the box open and pulled out a packet. 'Would you like one?'

'Maya Swell, eh?'

'You see? Marketing genius. And take these ...' the droid ripped into a yellow carton and held up a handful of glossy brown sweets. 'Spaceman's Little Helper.'

'You're kidding me.'

'They were going to call them Spaceman's Friend but it was already trademarked.'

'They look like hard-boiled turds in dandruff.'

'Well, yes, but they've got strong market presence.'

Hal sniffed. 'Strong doesn't begin to cover it.' He glanced through the windows at the darkness outside. 'Look, I need to get back to my ship. Can I grab a few samples and settle up?'

'You can't go now! I've still got lots to show you!'

'I have to. Hand me a couple of those Tastee bars.'

The droid turned its blank face towards him. 'You're not really opening a sweet shop, are you?'

'Er ...'

'I see.' The droid tipped the Spaceman's Little Helpers back into the torn carton and tried to piece the faded lid back together. 'I didn't really believe you. I suppose it was more hope than anything.' It raised its head again. 'Hope is bad for robots. Did you know that?'

'I guess so,' muttered Hal, looking at the floor.

'I'll lose my job over this,' said the droid. It gathered a stray Spaceman's Helper and held it up between finger and thumb.

'Junked,' it said, crushing the sweet with a snap.

'Is there anything I can do to help?'

The droid hung its head. 'I doubt it.'

'How much are these?' asked Hal, tapping the Maya Swell box.

'Twenty-two fifty,' said the droid in a dull voice.

'And the Spaceman's thingies?'

'Nineteen eighty.' The droid looked up. 'You mean ...'

'Bag 'em up,' said Hal gruffly. 'I'll take the lot.'