[ChID:33]

[ScID:120]

\*\*\* IMPORTANT \*\*\*

This message has been modified by proof reader.

Besides, the proof reader **replaced straight quotes and apostrophes by curly ones**.

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[ChID:1]

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(You can download the complete text of Hal Spacejock, free, from http://www.spacejock.com.au/Hal1Download.html)

Hal Spacejock was sitting at the Black Gull’s flight console, his attention riveted to a small chessboard balanced amongst the toggle switches, flashing lights and status displays. a few weeks earlier he’d read an article extolling the benefits of the ancient game: how playing it would sharpen his mind, improve his memory and increase his attraction to the opposite sex. Chess had been an important part of his daily routine ever since, but 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 had one attracted to him. Briefly, he wondered whether it had been such a clever idea to play against the Navcom, the Black Gull’s onboard computer. Underpowered and outdated, it was still more than capable of running the ship’s accounts, navigation and life support systems while beating humans at simple board games. However, since Hal was the only human aboard the Black Gull, his choice of opponents was limited.

“Your turn,” said the Navcom, in a neutral female voice.

“I’m thinking.”

“While you’re planning your opening move, can I tell you about a special offer?”

“What kind of offer?” asked Hal suspiciously.

“Planet books have a chess title on sale.”

“Really? Put it on main.”

The wide viewscreen above the console turned red, and the word ‘SaLE’ appeared in vibrating yellow text. The letters grew legs and marched off the screen, bringing a wire basket on wheels into view.

“I don’t need all this crap,” said Hal. “Just show me the deal.”

“Almost there,” said the Navcom. “Keep watching.”

A flock of pigeons burst from the basket, leaving a tumbling cloud of feathers which dropped to the ground and formed the words ‘Special Offer’. a gust of wind blew the feathers away, and 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? Interstellar navigation for nutters? Moon landings for morons?”

“Shall I add those titles to your basket?”

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

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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!”

“Negative, 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.”

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“No sign of Jerling’s pilot,” said Hal, who was standing in the Black Gull’s airlock peering through a scratched, yellowed porthole. 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.

“No thanks. Vurdi’s robot might be hanging around.”

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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 Lamira spaceport’s administration block, which shimmered in the late afternoon heat. Clustered around the spaceport buildings were the ‘A’ list - modern, powerful ships fitted with every comfort. Parked close to the amenities, their crews could dine at one of several restaurants, enjoy the heated swimming pool and browse the shopping arcade at their leisure.

Hal’s ship was somewhat further down the alphabet, and was therefore sitting in a disused corner of the field about as far from the amenities as the nearest moon. The area around the *Black Gull* was little more than a graveyard for derelicts, and most of the landing pads nearby were occupied by graffiti-splashed wrecks with jagged gaps in their crumpled hulls. Some of the ships seemed familiar, and when Hal looked closer he realised the rusted hulks were Rigel-class freighters like his own. One or two were actually in better shape.

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

“Yes.”

“Run a search, please. All details 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.”

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Hal left the maintenance vehicle in the spaceport’s outer carpark and walked to the admin block. An information kiosk directed him to an elevator, where he pressed the button marked ‘Portmaster’.

Hal watched the floor numbers changing as he dropped further and further underground. He’d expected the Portmaster to have a spacious office with a view of the whole landing field, but instead he seemed to have an office in the basement. Below the basement, amended Hal, eying the elevator’s control panel. He’d passed that already.

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“Simulation suspended, incoming message.”

The cloud cities of Aklam faded from Clunk’s vision. “What?”

“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 in cash for landing fees and fuel.”

“I don’t think he’ll lend you any money,” said Clunk dubiously.

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Portmaster Linten studied Hal across the desk, eyes narrowed. “Are you telling me this Jerling character will pay your bill?”

“He has to. I can’t deliver his cargo if the Gull is stuck here, can I?”

The commset buzzed and Linten leant forward. “Yes?”

There was a crackling sound. “Help! Fire!” said a voice over the noise.

“Who is this? What are you talking about?”

“The grass is burning,” cried the voice. “There’s a fire on the landing field!”

“Which pad?”

“Fifty-two,” said Hal, smothering a grin. “That’s Clunk.” He leant towards the commset. “Clunk, is the ship in danger from this, er, fire?”

“Not yet, Mr Spacejock, but it soon will be. Would you like me to move it out of the way?”

“You keep your hands off the controls. I’ll be there in a tick.”

“You’ll have to hurry, the fire’s right up to the refuelling cluster. If that explodes—”

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“Deploy fire hose!” shouted Clunk.

“Deploying.” There was a whining sound outside the hull, which stopped with a sharp crack.

“What was that?”

“The reel just fell off,” said the Navcom.

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