PROLOGUE

'Attention all crew, attention all crew. Planet Dumed is now in sensor range. Please enact landing procedures and prepare for arrival.'

Hal Spacejock leaned forward in his chair as a small blue disc appeared on the *Black Gull*'s main viewscreen. The image was grainy, flickery and hard to make out on the ancient, worn-out monitor, but he felt a thrill all the same. For the first time in his life, he was piloting his very own spaceship, and when he disembarked on Dumed, it would only be the third planet he'd ever set foot on.

But first he'd have to work out how to land the ship because not only did Hal lack a pilot's licence, he'd never flown anything bigger than a paper plane.

Lift-off had been easy. He'd just pushed the throttle forward as far as it would go, and the ship had blasted off with a bone-shaking, mind-jarring, body-crushing roar of pure power. But landing was another matter. Unlike going up, when you went down again there was something large and unyielding sitting in the way. Namely, a planet.

'Navcom,' he began. 'You're fully automated, right?'

'I was programmed to control every aspect of this ship,' said the computer, in a neutral female voice.

Relieved, Hal sat back in his chair. 'So you can set us down on Dumed?'

'Affirmative.' The Navcom hesitated. 'As much as I dislike correcting human mistakes, I should point out that locals pronounce it "Doomed".'

'They can pronounce it "hole in the ground" for all I care, as long as there are lots of cargo jobs.' Hal gestured at the screen. 'Show me the list again, will you?'

'Retrieving cargo jobs.' The screen flickered, and rows and rows of text appeared. 'Cargo jobs displayed.'

'Ease up on stating the obvious, will you?'

'Noted.'

Hal's gaze took in the itemised list of jobs, and especially the lucrative payments for each. 'I'm going to be rich,' he announced.

'I doubt that very much,' said the Navcom.

'Stop correcting me all the time.'

'Accuracy mode disabled. Incidentally, ground control is signalling us.'

'Well, signal them back again.'

'The signal requires your interaction.'

Hal ran his fingers through his mop of hair, straightened his flight suit and tried to look like an experienced space pilot. 'Okay, put them on the main screen.'

'It's audio only,' said the Navcom. 'Playing it now.'

'Black Gull, *this is Dumed tower. Please transmit your ID and manifest, and be sure to obtain clearance before approaching the planet. Over.'*

'Er ...' said Hal, completely at sea. 'Navcom ... do what they said.'

'ID and manifest transmitted,' said the computer promptly.

'And the clearance thing?'

'Unable to comply. Human interaction required.'

'How do I do that?'

'You must authorise your virtual assistant to act on your behalf.'

'That's you, isn't it?'

'I am an advanced flight computer. I do not handle such mundane work.'

'So how do I authorise this virtual assistant thing?'

'You can't. You don't have one.'

* * *

Hal gaped at the Navcom's speaker. 'Are you telling me we can't even land without one of these assistant things?'

'Correct. In fact, every aspect of life on this planet involves virtual assistants of one kind or another. People even use their assistants to watch AI-generated content, and then their assistant leaves comments for other assistants to argue with. I should point out that without your own virtual assistant, life here is completely impossible.'

'Why didn't you point that out before we came here?'

'You didn't ask, and I thought it was common knowledge.'

'Navcom, in future I want you to treat me like I have absolutely no knowledge at all. None! Got it?'

There was a lengthy silence.

'Aren't you supposed to say "complying" or "affirmative" or something?'

'There is no need for confirmation, as I already regard you as having no practical knowledge or skills of any kind.'

'Thanks a lot,' snorted Hal. 'Okay, call the tower for me. I want to speak to someone in person.'

'Putting you through.'

'Thank you for contacting Dumed tower—'

'Yes, listen, this is Hal Spacejock here, flying the *Black Gull*. I'm trying to land but—'

*'—unfortunately all our operators are busy right now, and the wait time is *click* three hundred and ninety-eight hours *click*. However, if you want to avoid the queue, you may connect your virtual assistant at any time. While you wait, here is a word from today's sponsor.'*

'You don't understand. I don't have a virtual assistant!'

'Space pilots, wouldn't you enjoy tasty, nutritious meals served up on demand? Install a Kleen-Aire Corporation AutoChef, then sit back and put your feet up while tens of thousands of patented nanobots assemble your meal. Do you fancy chicken and chips at three in the morning but don't feel like catching and dressing a hen? With AutoChef there's no plucking problem! Do you want ice-cream for breakfast? Chill! With AutoChef, it's sundaes every day! AutoChef ... call now, our technicians are standing by to change your life.'

'I don't want a damned AutoChef,' growled Hal. 'Listen, I can't wait around up here for ...' He attempted a quick mental calculation '... weeks or months or whatever. I need to set down now!'

'Remember, Kleen-Aire Corporation has your food needs covered!'

'Is anyone listening?' demanded Hal. 'Hello?'

'This is Dumed tower,' said the electronic voice. *'If you're in need of immediate attention, please say "help" now.'*

'Help!'

'To obtain help, please connect your virtual assistant.'

'Oh, you have to be kidding me.' Hal gestured, cutting the call. 'I'm sunk,' he declared. 'I'm not going to be a rich cargo pilot, I'm going to be a dried-up skeleton orbiting this planet for thousands of years in a derelict husk of a spaceship.' He rounded on the Navcom. 'You should have warned me about this!'

'I did point out that it was highly unlikely you would ever be rich.'

'Not that! I mean this virtual assistant nonsense.'

'If I warned you about every adverse condition on every inhabited planet in the galaxy, you would die of old age long before I finished.'

'Yeah, but this Dumed place ... I can't even land here! What if I visit a bunch more planets and they're all like this one?'

'There are no other planets like Dumed.'

'Why?'

'Initiating history lesson,' said the Navcom. 'Planet Dumed was settled in—'

'No history!' cut in Hal.

'Very well. I will merely point out that on planet Dumed the top one of the population owns everything and runs everything.'

'You mean the top one *per cent* owns everything.'

'I meant what I said.'

'One man owns the whole planet?'

'Woman, actually. First, she was made president for life, and then she bullied the population into submission. Due to the endemic corruption, distrust of outsiders, high tax rates, crushing tariffs, protectionist policies, and a 'shoot first and ask questions later' approach to policing, immigration and most charitable

organisations, the rest of the galaxy has been avoiding Dumed for almost a decade now.'

'And yet somehow you decided this was the best place in the galaxy to bring me.'

'You asked for a planet with, and I quote, "tons of cargo jobs paying good money".' The Navcom hesitated. 'There is one potential solution to your current problem.'

'Really?' Hal sat up. 'Spill it.'

'You could rent a virtual assistant by the hour—'

'Navcom, you're a genius!'

'—if you had any money.'

Hal thought for a moment. 'Can I rent one by the minute?'

'Given your present liquidity, you couldn't even rent one by the second.'

'Then it's not much of a solution, is it?' snapped Hal.

'I said it was a potential solution. I did not say it was possible.'

Hal looked around the flight deck. 'There must be something I can sell off.'

'Grimy coffee cups and used flight suits are not currently experiencing high levels of demand, and most parts of this ship are attached to it for a very good reason. The engines, for example, or this cockpit.'

'I need suggestions, not excuses.'

'There is one valuable asset in your possession. The ship's fuel tanks are eighty per cent full, and I estimate you will only need seventy per cent to successfully complete a cargo delivery. It follows that you could sell the excess to fund an assistant.'

'Can you set all that up?'

'Indeed.'

'Don't sell me short, eh? I want full price for the fuel, not some low-end offer.'

'I can obtain market rate minus fifty per cent for import duties, minus another eight hundred per cent for the President's personal cut.'

Hal frowned. Even with his limited maths skills, eight hundred per cent sounded off. 'Er—'

'They tell the President she's getting eight hundred per cent, but in fact she only gets eight per cent. It works out because large numbers keep her happy, and she can't do basic maths either.'

'Figures.'

'She can't do maths *or* figures,' agreed the Navcom. 'Would you like me to proceed?'

'Okay, do it.'

'Ten per cent of your total fuel capacity has now been promised to a buyer on Dumed, leaving your tanks seventy per cent full after the transaction is completed.'

'Did I get the money?'

'Affirmative.'

'What if I just flew away and kept the fuel?'

'Your reputation would be in tatters and no company would ever deal with you again. Not to mention the legal implications.'

'Just a thought, Navcom. Just a thought.' Hal gestured. 'Okay, rent me one of those VA things, but I want the best deal you can find. I don't want you spending my money like water.'

'A company called Assist-me-Kwik has the best rates for virtual assistants.'

'Get me one of theirs, then. And once you've got it, connect me to the planet and let's get this ship on the ground.'