

KANGAZANG!

star stuff

PROLOGUE

Don't Worry, Be Happy

My life has no purpose, no direction, no aim, no meaning, and yet I'm happy. I can't figure it out. What am I doing right?

– Charles M. Schulz

The Kangazanian sun shone upon the reclining figure of Jeff Spooner, as he lay in his hammock, sipping a finely blended cocktail. Across the silvery, chrome sand, he could see his friend Barbaray Sprambladack Fasstalon-Scump (or 'Ray' for short, because nobody could remember it for long) immersed in a game of table tennis against a giggling male Orbot named Gridlock. The bearded barber was highly proficient in the game, and despite Gridlock's lightning fast reflexes and finely tuned synthetic joints, Ray kicked his plastisteel bottom every time. The breeze carried the inviting smoky aroma of kebabs, sizzling gently on a nearby barbecue grill. This, to Jeff, was pretty much as good as it gets. His cocktail almost slurped, he called out.

“Tail! Couple more of these, please love!”

From a nearby beach hut walked a shapely female android. She had been designated M25, her product code back on her homeworld of Orbitron, but Jeff had given her a more interesting nickname. Tailback was her new name, although Jeff had taken to abbreviating it to 'Tail.'

Her robotic 'brother' Gridlock, the giggling ping-pong player, was originally designated 'M4'. Both Orbots were made on Orbitron, (hence the term 'Orbots') and were happy to be free and living life like the 'fleshies', among their human friends. They too, were living the dream.

Tailback poured two more exotic-looking cocktails and headed across the sands. The standard white plastic plating that usually covered her had been replaced with that of finely brushed bronze, giving her an expensive suntanned look. A multi-coloured sarong completed her outfit, blowing gently in the sea air. Tailback was Jeff's latest, best, and if truth be told,

strangest girlfriend. He tried not to think of the logistics and oddities of a synthetic girlfriend, but as the days passed, he grew closer to her, and she to him.

Tailback didn't initially understand the feeling of love, even though she had detailed definitions of the word and its possible applications for organic lifeforms, but the more time she spent with Jeff, the more she seemed to grasp the concept. In all honesty, she was coping better than most. After all, as a wise Welshman once sang, 'What is love, anyway? Does anybody love anybody, anyway?'

Jeff pushed his sunglasses up onto his head and smiled at his girl.

"Here you are, sweetie," purred the Orbot. Jeff took the drink and Tailback planted her sculpted lips onto his. The sun had warmed her faceplate up nicely, making Jeff jump momentarily.

"Ow! Hot lips!" he grinned. Tailback turned and carried the second drink over to Ray, who had finished his ping-pong game, and was heading for Jeff.

The portly ex-hairdresser hopped and skipped, as the sand was getting a bit too hot for comfort. The sea sloshed back and forth, the way thick custard would. Actually, exactly the way thick custard would, as that is exactly what it was. Rubbish for surfing, but lovely on pie, naturally.

"So – how are you finding it then?" said Ray. "I told you it was a nice place."

"Awesome, mate. Just perfect. Got me a drink, got me girl, and got me friends around. What more could a bloke want?"

Tailback indicated the barbecue.

"I think the kebabs are ready, too."

Jeff sighed in utter contentment. He raised his drink.

"Cheers, everybody!"

Suddenly, the custardy sea began to bubble ferociously and erupt. Everyone spun around to see a huge metallic lozenge emerge from the liquid. It was covered in small indentations, and Jeff recognised it as the shape of a monkey nut shell. Only this nut was over a hundred feet long.

A loud voice boomed out over the bubbling sea, shaking the trees as it rumbled.

"People of Kangazang! You are now prisoners of the armed forces of Macadamia! Your land and riches are now our property, and any resistance will be crushed. So says our Great Prophecy!"

Ray was far from intimidated. After all he'd been through, a giant talking nut shell wasn't going to frighten him easily. He grinned a

confident grin.

“Oh, I don’t think so. How ‘bout we show these nutjobs who’s boss around here, eh Jeff?”

“Jeff?”

Ray turned his head to see Jeff running away across the beach as fast as possible, with Tailback following after him.

Ray sighed.

“Wait for me!” he yelled.

He tried his best to run away from the obvious threat of molecular disintegration, but his flip-flop sandals couldn’t get any purchase in the millions of chrome balls that made up the beach. He fell over, rolled and found himself sitting on the rattling bearings as the giant nut-shell split open, revealing a squad of dreaded Macadamian warriors. The squat humanoids, encased in beige walnut-style armour, marched down a ramp into the thick yellow sea, and kept on marching.

Ray could only sit and stare in fear at the soldiers. Actually that’s not true; he did that, but he also thought up a number of insulting names for Jeff and Tailback, who had deserted him and were nowhere to be seen. The soldiers waded out of the gooey slop and formed a semi-circle around the trembling barber. One barked an order.

“Take me to your leader!”

Ray looked dumbfounded.

“Eh? Wasn’t I supposed to say that?”

The Macadamian leader removed his wooden headgear, revealing a smooth and shiny head with minimal features.

“No! YOU will take ME to your leader, and we shall discuss the surrender of Kangazang! We are here to take over and rule this world, in the name of the Macadamian Empire.”

Ray had to think fast. Unfortunately, he could only think incredibly slowly.

“Er... Why?” he asked.

The nut looked as though someone had just dry roasted and eaten a close relative.

“Why? Because that is our purpose! That is what we’re here to do! Our Great Prophecy says so!”

Ray got to his feet and was surprised to discover that he was about three feet taller than the warriors.

“I see. Erm, how old is this great prophecy, then?” he said.

The nut looked deep in thought. Or at least as deep in thought as a

nut could look. Finally he looked up, a blank expression on his already mostly blank face.

“Um, it’s about a million years old, I think. So are you going to...?”

“A million years old?” interrupted Ray. He put a friendly arm around the leader’s shoulders. The rest of the warriors looked at each other in confusion.

“Listen, why don’t you look at it like this: You’re sent out halfway across the galaxy, declaring war on a planet that has no military forces anyway, just to fulfil some ancient prophecy that was written by your long-dead ancestors? What’s the point in that?”

He had a point. There was no point. That was his point, and it was good. Good point.

The nut scratched his head. It smelt like peanut butter, which was nice.

“Well, we have to fulfil the prophecy, don’t we? That’s what prophecies are for, I thought.”

Ray remained friendly and upbeat, sensing that this particular nut was cracking.

“Yes, well, back in the day, of course! But prophecies are often flung down on paper without the slightest care for the poor nutjobs – no offence – who have to fulfil them! Now, a million years later, the books are crumbling, the writers long gone, and there’s nothing to stop you lot from turning it into a bit of a holiday! Take a look around! Sun, sea, drinks and all the R&R you like!”

The soldiers mumbled in agreement, nodding. Many of them lowered their weapons in relief. The leader raised a hand.

“Well, that does sound like more fun, I freely admit. But what do you mean by, ‘no military forces?’” he asked.

“This is a peaceful world!” said Ray. “Fun! Leisure and relaxation! Nobody stresses out here! Nobody fights! The only disagreements are between lovers, who refuse to hang up the phone first!”

“Ooo,” said the nut in astonishment. For a race bred especially for the horrors of war, the concept of anything other than glorious battle was a lot to take in.

“Well, we could use a change of pace. What do you think, men?” asked the leader. The soldiers were all up for a bit of a break, and they nodded, mumbling enthusiastically. Ray was pleased.

“There you go then! Park the ship over by the cliffs there, everyone relax and I’ll go mix the drinks!”

As Ray turned, the leader of the nuts tapped him on the back.

“We can’t just do this all day every day though. We’ll get bored! After all, we were grown for war, you know.”

Ray had an idea. He was getting good at finding realistic solutions to abstract problems now. It must have been rubbing off on him from Jeff. He looked at the mildly confuddled nut.

“What’s your name, sergeant?” he asked.

“Colonel.” said the soldier.

“Oh, sorry. What’s your name, Colonel?”

“Kernel.”

Ray blinked. “We’re getting mixed up. What’s your name again?”

“Kernel.”

“That’s your name?”

“Yes, Kernel.”

“And your rank?”

“Colonel.”

“Ah, I see!” declared Ray. “Colonel Kernel!”

“That’s right.”

“Oh! Brilliant! Okay then, Colonel Kernel,” said Ray brightly, “Here’s what we’ll do – I’ll go and have a word with the Kangazanian authorities on your behalf. I’m sure I can convince them to let you lot stay on, as a sort of home guard. In the meantime, you lot go and relax. You’ll soon get the hang of it. Be good to come out of your shells.” Ray winked, more in admiration of his own wit than anything else. Colonel Kernel needed clarification.

“So, what your saying is, we hang around all day...?”

“Yeeees...” said Ray.

“...And if there are any problems, we’ll be called to sort it out? Like a planetary defence force?”

“Yes. Exactly!”

“...And that’s it?” asked the Colonel.

“In a – pardon the expression – nutshell.”

The soldiers ran off, whooping and screaming in delight. Ray felt a tremendous sense of achievement.

Life was good.

CHAPTER ONE

Something amiss in the midst of this bliss.

The true perfection of man lies not in what man has, but in what man is.

– Oscar Wilde

For those of you who already know something of Jeff Spooner and his life up until now, then well done, well read, well heard and well assimilated. And for those of you who haven't...Where *have* you been? This is important stuff, you know.

Jeffrey Richard Raymond Spooner was born on Earth on the Twentieth of December, in the late Twentieth Century. His parents, Dave and Eunice were rather surprised, as they were expecting a tax rebate.

For the next two decades and a bit, Jeffrey grew. He evolved, from 'Mummy's Special Soldier' to 'That Lazy Git Upstairs'. One rarely meets their parent's expectations. But this is alright, you see, as Jeff was to make up for his inherent lazy-gitness later on in life, when he became embroiled in galaxy-threatening struggles and misadventures, which led to him, and his new best friend, a Gent's hairdresser called Ray, saving the numerous inhabitants of the Universe from doom, despair, destruction and depression. Mustn't grumble, eh? Turned out nice again. Et Cetera.

Anyway, back to the subject of happiness, and the pursuit thereof. Some of the greatest minds known to lifekind have said, with varying degrees of accuracy, that attaining happiness in one's life is easy.

Unfortunately, nobody likes to have their metaphorical nose rubbed in the whiffy smugness of others. Or any other sensory organ for that matter. We all strive to find a lasting, personal and genuine happiness in our brief existences, and no matter how great or feeble our quests to find it may be, having some smugly-grinning freak tell us that they've achieved it before us with a foolproof method of doing so, (almost certainly a lie)

is a sure way to put us back at square one on the board game of emotional contentment. More often than not it drives one mad, sometimes with tragic consequences.

Talking of emotions, I don't wish to get all Emo on you, but truly happy people are rare. Or at least, endangered. In this sector of the Galaxy, (I assume you're reading the HumanSpecies / EarthEnglish version of this book) most people love to complain that their lives are less than perfect. I know I do. Having a direct link to Human Beings, I've inherited it. On the other hand, humans like to gloss over their perturbations with cheery quips such as, 'Mustn't grumble,' 'Still, you've got to laugh, haven't you?' and 'Don't worry, be happy.'

Anyway, as I've said, most people are on a lifelong quest for happiness, and Jeff was no exception. He nearly got there, gaining himself a set of employable skills, a small group of friends and a beautiful fiancée named Sarah. Well, I *say* 'beautiful'...

In the same way that Jeff was the unachieving offspring of undemanding parents, so Sarah was a similar case. In the opposite way: Kenneth and Gladys Wood insisted that their little girl should think more, do more, be more and generally be a better class of human than anyone else. Their misguided plans to better their child had tragic consequences; rather than remaining successful and happy(ish), Sarah was emotionally scarred with an inbuilt feeling of not quite being good enough, and an unshakable desire to want bigger and better things for herself. She was never satisfied, (although annoyingly smug) and despite Jeff's attempts to placate her, her whims were legion. Things came to a head – quite literally – when she found a better alternative to Jeff: Reverend Wilson, the local priest.

Both parties had moved on with their lives. Sarah had reason to believe that Jeff had died in a bizarre toilet-related accident – I'll explain later – and was assured of never seeing him again, while Jeff had moved on in a geographical sense – over thirty-thousand light years, to the luxurious beaches on the planet of Kangazang. See? Happiness is indeed, a state of mind. Especially if your mind's in a right state.

I blame the parents, myself.

Sarah Wood was enjoying her life, too.

She had recently acquired a new job, and moved from the big city

to another city, just not quite as big. Swansea was welcoming, breezy and getting more cosmopolitan by the day. She liked it very much – from the exhilarating sea air, the coffee shops and quaint houses, to the full-on night life. Not that she felt the need to go out and get trashed any more these days, but it was there if she needed it.

She felt she deserved a little happiness by now. Her life was in danger of doing that downward spiral thing of late, and the move and change of pace seemed to have done the trick. Where once she was in a loveless relationship with a scruffy, kebab-loving loser, she now had Simon: a gorgeous hunk of a man. Taller, smarter, well turned out and healthier. He was a minister too, so she found him trustworthy and genuine. She wasn't particularly religious, but thought a direct line to 'The Man Upstairs' was a handy insurance policy.

Alright, so she'd begun a relationship with him while still with the other loser, but her love for him had dried up a long time ago.

Alright, so her randy reverend had initiated the affair, but it was a minor transgression that led to her new life, so perhaps he was doing the Good Lord's work.

Alright, so the recent tragic, sudden, and frankly bizarre death of her ex-fiancé made her feel a sense of guilty relief deep down inside, but one can't mourn the past forever.

Alright, so she didn't even go to the funeral. And she sold the engagement ring.

Alright, she was completely rotten to the core. No two ways about it.

But Sarah, like all notoriously evil beings in history, didn't think she was that bad. She felt that she'd done well to take the unsatisfactory life that she once had, and mould it into something far better. A new life with a new man, in a new town with a new job. Things were finally right and working well for her. And she was enjoying every second of it.

Unfortunately, just when you begin to enjoy something, when your life's roller-coaster car reaches the highest point with the best view... that's the moment it lurches into a steep nosedive, which usually makes your stomach churn and leaves you with your hair in a mess and your breakfast in your lap.

Sarah had recently become engaged to Simon, her magnificent minister, and proudly showed off the engagement ring to everyone. It was so much nicer and more expensive than the one she had from... him.

Jeff. Jeffrey Richard Raymond Spooner. Jeffo. The Jeffster. Scruffy

painter and decorator. Lager lover and Kebab addict. She reluctantly allowed herself to reminisce about the day they met: she was out with a group of friends, celebrating a birthday. They'd already had a meal and a few bottles of wine, so although the night was relatively young – let's say irresponsibly adolescent – the gang was already well on the way to alcoholic oblivion. Alcoblivion, if you will.

She remembered standing in a noisy, run-down bar called Kiwi's. It was a cramped pub that thought it was a disco. There were far too many people in there for the size of the place, and all of them thought it was a disco too. A better description of the place would be a 'Dipsoteque'. Some patrons were tipsy, some utterly smashed, and the others were getting there rapidly, courtesy of 'Happy Hour', which curiously, lasted for about five very happy hours. Every so often, this reasonably attractive, mousy-haired guy would stagger past her group, on his way to the bar or the toilets. He'd catch her eye and grin inanely.

The first time he did it, she looked away. The next time, she smiled back, then looked away. The third time, she decided to pull a face at him. The only reasonably funny and abnormal face she could do was that twisty one, where your top lip goes off to the right and your bottom one goes off in the opposite direction. Looks very seductive. Well, not really. Anyway, she did this, which made him smile, and the next time he walked past, he did the same face. Ah, the subtleties of romantic courtship. Four and a half billion years of evolution, pretty much wasted.

This went on for a good couple of hours, both gurning neanderthals pulling weird faces at each other, until finally Jeff had the courage to stop and slur something. To cut a long story short, they ended up together in a bus shelter, exchanging phone numbers, half-truths and saliva. Then he asked Sarah for a loan of a few quid so that he could get a taxi home.

Now she thought about it, that was the pattern for their relationship: a little show of affection in return for a monetary loan. All the time! Money for this, money for that. Promises to pay it back that never amounted to anything. In fact, in the twelve months of whirlwind romance that she'd known Jeff, she only remembered him repaying her once. And that was the day on which Jeff died. And the bizarre way in which it happened.

She remembered it well, that very strange day. After catching her and Wilson in one of many compromising positions, Jeff had finally realized that it was all over. She recalled him visiting her in the wee small hours, semi-drunk, to tell her that he was going to Canada to think things

over. Then, a few hours after she'd sent him away, there was an apparent explosion at the local barber shop. The investigating police never found the bodies of the proprietor, Ray Scump, nor Jeff. And the airports confirmed that he never left the country either. They established that he'd visited the doomed barber shop earlier that afternoon, upon Sarah's behest. When Jeff had last spoken to Sarah, she'd asked him for the fifty pounds that he owed her. A few minutes after the explosion, the money dropped out of the sky – literally, landing on her balcony. Seconds after that, she (and her new man) were hit by a few litres of human waste products.

The police deduced that the explosion must have been a gas main, which blew both Ray and Jeff to smithereens, fractured the sewage pipes, flinging the slurry up into the air. It was just good (or bad, depending on your perspective) luck, that the poop-goop landed on Sarah. But she had her money back. And that was a good thing, at least. And she didn't see the point of attending Jeff's funeral, as he wasn't even there. It is, after all, rather difficult to bury a smithereen.

Except we know that it didn't happen like that at all.

The facts were these:

Jeff had discovered Ray, completing repairs to his spacecraft, the magnificently-titled 'Marshmallow Penguin', and the subsequent launch was what led everyone to believe it was a gas explosion. Once airborne, Jeff insisted on returning Sarah's money to her, by having Ray hover the ship directly above her house. As a final touch, Jeff emptied the ship's chemical lavatory out of the hatch, to thank Sarah for cheating on him. Revenge, as the saying goes, is indeed a splash best served cold. And a bit lumpy. Then they sped off to the stars, to carve their legends... Ah, what a story.

But I digress. Again. There will be much digressing. You'll have to forgive me and try to keep up, as my mind is on an infinite number of things at once. I'm good like that.