

UNCORRECTED DRAFT COPY

# KANGAZANG!

SF Novel

by

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One sample chapter from the novel  
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## PROLOGUE

### The Prophecy

**F**ar out in the deep inky voidness of space, the imposing world of Emo Prime hung listlessly.

Its ring of asteroids encircled it, spinning and colliding enthusiastically, hundreds of miles above the mottled black-and-white surface of the planet. To the passing observer, it looked rather like the severed head of a panda bear, surrounded by a cloud of gnats. Only less furry, and not as disturbing to see.

Deep down on the surface beneath the sullen clouds, there stood a great cathedral. A towering, ornate behemoth of Gothic design, dark and foreboding, into which a steady stream of shrouded and dour figures shuffled, moaning softly to pass the time on their arduous pilgrimage.

The village meeting was in progress.

The High Priest, tall and spider-like, clad in elegant robes of the dullest colours, addressed the assembled throng of sour-faced listeners.

“Mood: Apathetic,” he called out.

“Mood: Apathetic,” replied the crowd in unison, both as an acknowledgement and answer.

Looking out over the hundreds of pale faces, each one framed by lank but shiny black hair, the Priest took a deep creaking breath, and began his sermon.

“To the Highest on high, the gods of Emo, and their desolate hearts, we send out praise. To uphold the principles of the Holy ABC – Apathy, Boredom and Complacency, we dedicate our pointless existences. This

day, and forever, we yearn for the comforting solace of a dark and cold grave."

It was a particularly cheery one, today's sermon. After all, the Priest had some particularly cheery news to tell. He swept a wrinkly pale finger across his wrinkly pale forehead to clear his eyes of limp black hair.

"Be thou warned," he began, accompanied by some serious finger-waggage, "That the Evil One and his accomplice are due to arrive... at any time, now that the planets have aligned. That he shall walk among us and spread the terror and fear that will end our lives."

A visible shudder rippled through the audience; the desired response. He continued with vigour:

"That they will bring upon us the plagues and afflictions of Joy, Smiling and," he paused for maximum effect, "..Laughter!"

The crowd began to mumble, clearly unnerved by the thought of happiness in any format. The Priest read on, with a weird grimace crossing his crumply-paper face.

"And when they arrive, we must be vigilant! We must prove to the Evil Ones that we SHALL worry! We shall NOT be happy! Only then will they tremble in fear of us! And only then will we do what must be done to purge the badness of their spirits."

He took another final deep breath.

"WHAT WILL WE DO?" he yelled out to the crowd.

In unison again, the crowd called back:

"Complain! Condemn! Convert!"

The Priest was satisfied.

"Justice will be done," he thought, "Our society is safe."

But he was unaware that society as he knew it, was about to change forever.

Or, for about an hour at least.



## CHAPTER ONE

## The Man From Kangazang

Anyway. Our story, like many unearthly stories, starts, rather predictably, on Earth.

Except for the previous part that didn't, obviously. You get the idea.

Jeff Spooner sat in the barber's chair, getting his bi-monthly trim. He looked around the faux-pine clad walls, and gazed at the flecks of mousy brown hair that slid down the apron in front of him. Haircuts seemed to be taking less time each month, he mused, while the percentage of silvery-grey seemed to be increasing. Surely they'd cancel each other out, at some point?

He looked up as far as he could without moving his head, and saw that his hairdresser was wearing an odd tie-pin that bore a penguin in a fetching shade of pink.

"Doing anything interesting this weekend?" asked Ray the Barber.

Ray was in his early forties, almost but-not-quite portly, but still quite energetic. He sported a rapidly greying set of hairdo and goatee, which made him look a little like a jazz musician.

His head looked like his hair was trying to evacuate his scalp and hide down around the back of his head, a sort of furry curtain. In his shirt, tie and white barbers' coat, he was always well turned-out, as are most barbers, and full of interesting yarns, many of which made no sense at all – again, as are most barbers.

Jeff looked up into the mirror, to see Ray snipping

away effortlessly.

"Yeah," replied Jeff, "Sarah's birthday, innit? She wants to go to the theatre. Cats, I think. Load of rubbish – I'd rather go down the footy, but it is her birthday after all."

Ray nodded.

"Her treat I suppose. Do they have a good choice then, in the theatre?"

"Choice of what – plays?" said Jeff, in slight confusion.

"Cats," said Ray. "I wasn't aware they started selling pets there."

Jeff blinked.

"No, mate... 'Cats' – the play," he began, thinking that this might possibly be a wind-up, "They don't sell cats in a theatre, do they?"

Ray looked embarrassed and tried to make amends.

"Oh *theatre!* I thought you said...er...*THE CATTER-y*. Yeah, sorry, plays. Good choice?"

Jeff shook his head briefly, to wake up his senses a bit. The internal rattling didn't help.

"Er... yeah. Good choice of plays, yes."

He decided to leave it at that. It was too early for surrealism right now.

Jeff had known Ray the barber for nearly ten years. They weren't exactly best buddies, but since Jeff met his fiancée, and found that she was very exacting in the way she wanted her future husband to look, he had to pop in for a trim - without fail - every two weeks. Thus, he and Ray had struck up the beginnings of a friendship.

Ray did have some minor eccentricities, when he thought about it. He was the kind of guy who never quite seemed to be on the same page as everyone else. And the lifestyle: For example, he always refused an offer to go down the pub. In fact, Jeff had never seen Ray outside of his salon. He seldom talked about his family, except to say that they were far away. And he charged next to nothing

for his haircuts, as if he genuinely didn't need the money and was doing it just for the fun of it. But to each his own, thought Jeff.

The barber's skilful hands swiftly completed the job.

"Cheers Ray," said Jeff, as Ray whipped the nylon apron off him like a matador.

"What's the damage?" asked Jeff as he got up and out of the chair.

"That's um, one pound and... *seven* pence, please," replied Ray, picking a random figure out of thin air, and simultaneously opening his olde-worlde till with a push of a button.

Jeff paused.

"One pound *seven*? Have you put your prices *down* again?"

Ray smiled sheepishly.

"Well, yeah. Need to get some more customers. You know how it is..." he mumbled, looking rather embarrassed.

"I'm a fairy, my name is Nuff," said Jeff, pulling out some coins.

Ray looked a little puzzled.

"No it isn't, it's Jeff."

Jeff wasn't sure if Ray was really serious, so he let it slide.

"You really should charge more, mate. Seriously. The hairdressers down the road charge a minimum of seven quid for a dry cut. You won't be in business much longer."

Ray seemed to agree, like it was a good thing

"That's the plan," he said cheerfully.

Jeff brushed some specks of hair from his neck, and reached over for his jacket, which hung on a hook nearby.

"So, you're off on holiday, then? Or retiring?"

"A little from Column 'A', and a little from Column 'B', Jeff. Taking a trip, really. Going to... er... visit my family."

“Oh right... where did you say they are, again?” asked Jeff, putting the jacket on.

Ray closed the till.

“Kanga... Er, Kanga-da. *Canada*”

Taking a side step to allow another man to take the chair, Jeff nodded.

“Oh right. Canada. Bit nippy out there, mate, make sure you wrap up warm!”

“Well, I’ll be on the beach a lot, if I can help it,” said Ray, “Cheerio!”

“See ya mate,” called Jeff as he stepped out of the salon

“Hang a banger,” he thought, “There aren’t any beaches in Canada.” Then he chuckled to himself. Ray always was a bit of a peculiar one.

Inside the salon, Ray smiled to himself.

Jeff always was a bit of a peculiar one, he thought.

But in all honesty, it was Jeff who was closer to the truth: Compared to him, Ray was the peak of peculiarity.

So peculiar, Jeff couldn’t even begin to imagine how peculiar.

Peculiarities, especially in this reality, are something of a paradox. This is because there are so many millions upon billions of peculiarities in each and every aspect of existence, that they actually are the norm and not peculiar at all. So to be brutally honest (another paradox, incidentally), the most peculiar thing one could ever find is something completely normal.

But in the spirit of goodwill, progression and in the equally important spirit of ‘moving-things-along-ness’, we’ll just assume that you share the narrow-minded human definition of peculiarity. Thought you’d agree.

In another part of the galaxy, hung the peculiar planet Orbitron. As its name suggests, it’s not your common-or-garden planet. Resembling a gigantic ball-bearing or, to be

more accurate, a chrome-plated Brussels Sprout, it was an entirely artificial, metal construction. Not a diabolical weapon of planetary destruction – *Star of Death, anyone?* – but a peaceful world that offered assistance, obedience and a local-rate technical assistance line to the countless peoples of the universe.

Orbitron was inhabited by – and indeed, built by, robots. Or as they preferred to be known, Orbots. It sounded better, as they now had a place to actually belong, just like the 'fleshies'. Artificial beings of all shapes and sizes lived there, from minuscule nano-surgeons to towering Constructorbots. They lived in happy compatibility and prospered, being efficient and regularly upgraded, rebooted and defragmented. Of course, there are exceptions to every rule, and Orbitron was no different from any planet, in that it had its fair share of undesirables and non-runners. These unfortunate Orbots were known as the M-Classes. So named as they were designated 'M' for malfunction.

Because the Orbots were a kindly and benevolent race, they tried to repair their broken brothers and sisters, until it became too expensive, but some just wouldn't be fixed. They tried installing newer operating systems, re-formatting their hard drives, and even the last-resort of disconnecting them from the InfoHEX – (InformationHyperEXpressway) entirely, but the source of the bugs still managed to elude them.

The M-class Orbots lived in the lesser-developed areas of Orbitron, mainly on the surface. It was a sort of slum – the malfunctioning mechas went about their lives fending off meteor showers and magnetised space debris, while their more sophisticated cyber-siblings lived below the surface, running the server farms and doing all the techy stuff. It was on the surface of Orbitron where M4 and his female-designated cohabitant, M25 lived.

M4 was, for all purposes, a fine Orbot.

He had all his limbs and his programming was nigh-on perfect. Except – something deep and elusive in his software had a strange effect on his thought process. Everything he experienced seemed to be funny to him in some way. Humour and hilarity took over his operational matrix. He just couldn't take anything seriously.

Seriously.

No, seriously.

Although this minor malfunction didn't really interfere with his day-to-day work, his superiors stamped him with an 'M' and sent him up onto the surface because, quite frankly, they had had more than enough of his constant sniggering and jokey comments.

The ruling-class mainframes of Orbitron tolerated him for as long as they could, but in a world reliant on the solemnity of logic and conformity, there was no place for this annoying Orbot who laughed at anything, all of the time. You could understand their reasons. If you've ever worked in an office environment that had a person labelled 'the office joker', you'll know what I mean.

His cohabitant unit, M25, was perfectly fine with this. She thought it was sort of endearing and made him more human-like. She too, seemed like a perfectly operational Orbot – shiny and curved in all the right places. She was a veritable Venus in white plastic and chromed parts. But one had to be very gentle with her – due to her phobias. This became a problem when they manifested themselves shortly after her Operation Day.

Most organisms, whether artificial or fleshy, learn to cope with irrational phobias, but M25 couldn't. Nor could those around her, as these phobias changed regularly. It could be oil that terrified her one minute, then her own feet the next. She was a nervous wreck when they dumped her on the surface, trembling at the sight of the starry sky,

then wailing in fear at the arrival of M4, when he said 'hello' (then burst out laughing) for the first time. But between them, they seemed to cope fairly well, and thus, they got on with life.

Their surface tasks were to repair and refuel docking spacecraft that passed by. Occasionally, M4 would crack a really terrible joke and laugh uncontrollably at his own humour, and M25 would run away, screaming in horror as a visiting ship's dog sniffed her silver leg, but generally they did okay. But they, like the numerous other M-Class Orbots, wished for something better, something really interesting and heroic to re-define their lives. Who said that androids dream only of electric sheep?

They were about to get their wish.

And tenuous though the link may be, wishing is what brings us back to our rather un-peculiar and normal (well, *relatively* normal) human being called Jeff Spooner.

Jeff was in a bad way. He wished for a lot in his life, like everyone does, but tonight, he'd wished that he'd caught the later bus to Sarah's house. He wished he'd not decided to surprise her by turning up unannounced with the theatre tickets and medium-priced bouquet of chrysanthemums and various strands of overpriced posh grass.

But most of all, he wished he hadn't stood at Sarah's bedroom door to catch her in a rather compromising position with the local reverend. *He* may have stuck to his story about 'performing an exorcism', but that dog-collared deviant wasn't fooling anyone.

Talk about spreading the good word- he was spreading the good bird, and although Jeff had a healthy respect for the clergy and the very good work they do, he felt it only right that he should perform his very own exorcism and beat seven shades of evil out of the vicarious

vicar.

Thus, Jeff sat at the bar of the Red Lion Inn, and sniffed, watching his tears *ploop* into his un-sipped pint.

"I'm sure he won't press charges, Jeff," offered Glyn the barman, "After all, it's not going to go down very well with his superiors, and it'd ruin his career for such a young bloke..."

To Jeff, this was hardly a comfort. He sniffed again and looked up with his watery blue eyes.

"It was her birthday. Birthday! I still can't believe she'd do this to me. I never two timed her, I never mistreated her, I never once hurt her!" he whimpered.

The barman stopped him there.

"Ah – That's not strictly true, is it? There was the barbecue incident."

"That's not the same thing," mumbled Jeff, as he took a tiny sip of lager-with-a-dash-of-tears-and-runny-nose-extract.

"It wasn't intentional – how was I to know she was behind me when I swung the spatula?"

Glyn the barman suppressed his smirk. After all, Jeff was a valued regular. But the thought of Sarah with a triangular black mark on her forehead where the hot fat had branded her otherwise pretty face, did tickle him somewhat. He tried to offer more sympathy.

"You mustn't blame yourself, Jeff..."

"No, I don't..." he began calmly, but then Jeff shook like a long-dead volcano spurting into fiery activity.

"I blame her!! That evil cow! That unscrupulous, scheming sodding tart! That – that uncaring, unfeeling bloody...bloody...*wench!*"

Jeff never was very good at profanity.

He took a deep breath, and grabbed his jacket. Leaving his snot-infused beverage to the purple-nosed old soak at the bar who'd sat beside him witnessing the entire

scene, he bid a mumbled, tipsy farewell to Glyn, and left for home.

To the crumpled old dipso, it was a lovely vintage, this one. *Mmmm.*

As he ambled down the high street, munching on one of Georgiou's Special Kebabs, Jeff wondered where his life was going.

Another peculiar thing (there will be many, so try to keep up) is that most people in this life (or the next, or indeed the *previous*), only ever make big plans, decisions or analytical forays into their own existences when they are either:

- a) drunk, or
- b) unhappy, or more often than not,
- c) both.

These three physical and emotional conditions are quite possibly the very worst time to make a deep decision of this kind. Then again, it may be the best opportunity to be completely honest with oneself. Or not. That's the beauty of alcohol and melancholia-induced psychoanalysis – nothing (*and indeed everything*) is what it seems. Or maybe it isn't. But it could be.

Anyway, Jeff was no exception.

He sat down on the cold steel bench within the bus shelter, and fished out the long green chilli peppers from his kebab. Finding three, he flung them rather skilfully into the litter bin nearby, and wiped his vinegar-tainted fingers on his jeans.

As he munched on the vaguely meat-like shoe leather, he began to hum a tune. A tune which he at first thought originated in his lager-addled mind:

*"Here's a little song I wrote,  
You might want to sing it note-for-note;*

*Don't worry...  
(bipidee bee boo beepdeedoo...)  
Be happy..."*

"Yeah, Bloody easy for you to say, *Muck-Ferret...*" slurred Jeff, to nobody in particular.

He'd read somewhere that Bobby Mc Ferrin, the writer of the offending tune, (*Also singer, composer, conductor, multi-instrumentalist and eternal optimist*) had topped himself in despair. After a little searching on the net, this had turned out to be a vicious, cruel and wholly inaccurate urban myth.

But right now, Jeff wished him dead.

"Don't worry, be buggered. Happy? *My bung-hole,*" he spat.

"The day that bloke saves a life instead of adding to the suicide figures, will probably be declared a public holiday..."

It turned out that the song wasn't in his mind at all, but drifting out of a nearby window, not far away. Jeff scrumpled up his kebab papers and dumped them into the litter bin. He walked toward the sound, mentally contemplating the gleeful strangulation of whoever seemed to be taunting him with the accursed happy ditty.

He turned the corner, and saw Ray's Gent's Salon.

The shop lights were on, and there was some definite activity inside. A party, perhaps? Jeff had never seen Ray in the pub, and he knew that Ray's family were in Canada. More to the point, Ray said he never touched alcohol, so why would there be music and life inside a barber's shop at nearly midnight?

Jeff crept closer to the window. Vertical blinds prevented him from getting a good view of the proceedings, but he could see Ray in there, dancing around with his brush, and a black rubbish sack, to the

strains of Kylie Minogue's first hit single, 'I Should Be So Lucky'. Mercifully, Mc Ferrin had had his three minutes.

Jeff smiled. Dancing to Kylie? He'd never seen Ray with a woman and concluded that he must be a little 'light in the loafers', so to speak. After all, he surmised, aren't *most* male hairdressers?

It's also true that those with the narrowest of minds prefer to tar others with the widest of brushes. But Jeff's rather narrow mind was due to be expanded laterally, not to mention exponentially from this night on.

Not that it was a problem for Jeff. He knew a few of the gay folk in the town, and didn't really mind what side their bread was buttered – so long as they kept their buttery knives to themselves, and didn't poke them into his peanut butter. And Ray seemed like the straight-acting type, which made him alright in Jeff's book.

*"It's not homophobia to be annoyed by a mincing fool like the ones they put on the telly,"* was his usual motto regarding the subject.

"But who'd've thunk it? Gay Ray."

Actually, it seemed less outlandish the more he thunk it. The tie-pin with the pink penguin on suddenly made sense.

It was at that point that Ray stopped the CD of eighties hits playing, and unlocked the salon door. He dragged the bin bag outside, and headed for the large lock up garage adjacent to the shop.

Jeff took a few steps back into the shadows of the wall next to him, and watched as Ray unlocked the large chains that held the huge wooden door of the lock-up. In actual fact, it was an old converted hay-loft, as Ray's salon was an old farm-house, a very nice place to live and work. How he could afford it while charging so little for a dry cut was indeed another mystery to add to the enigmatic chap.

Jeff remained there for a few moments, wobbling in the shadows, watching the proceedings. He did quite well, until Georgiou's Special Kebab did an acrobatic leap within his stomach, forcing out the loudest gurgling *ke-burp* that he'd had ever created.

Ray spun around. He brandished his broom like a baseball bat. Jeff stepped out of the dark corner, both hands raised.

"Whoa! Whoa! It's me, Ray. It's Jeff!"

Ray remained keenly alert, almost guiltily stunned. He shook the broom, threateningly.

"Don't come any closer!" he said, still looking terrified.

Things would have probably gone a little smoother had Jeff not seen the spaceship in the garage behind Ray.

And thrown up everywhere.

Jeff Spooner wasn't the only person having a hard time coping with recent events. For example, Reverend Wilson, the young and sinful vicar who had recently exercised (as opposed to *exorcised*) Jeff's fiancée, was nursing a few egg-sized bumps on his head, a split lip and "*two luvverly black eyes...*" as the song went. Jeff had surprised himself by doing such a thorough renovation job on the randy Rev's face, as he wasn't a violent man by any means. But if you're going to engage in facial pummellage, it's probably better to pummel someone who deserves it.

Talking of which, the vicar was driving home in his little car, wondering if he was going to be bunged out of the priesthood altogether the next morning. "Surely", he thought, "This is the work of the Devil" The wicked temptress that cruelly seduced him, and his subsequent punishment... Or was it his act of mercy to such a pretty and needy woman that led Satan's follower to dish out such a terrible and bloody wrath?

Whatever it was, he'd have a lot of explaining to do in

the morning. Hopefully, the Good Lord would provide him with a sign.

Jeff's ex-fiancée Sarah was also finding it difficult to come to terms with what had transpired only a few hours ago.

Lying in bed alone, she gazed out of the window, looking at the clear moonlit sky. But her face revealed a thin wry smile. Her concerns were for the severely dented reverend who had been in her arms (and a few other places) earlier on that night.

She smiled because she had managed to have her 'cake' and 'eat' it all this time, and now that her loser of a boyfriend had found out, she no longer had to deal with him. In all honesty, it turned out that Sarah really was an 'evil cow, an unscrupulous, scheming sodding tart, and an uncaring, unfeeling bloody... bloody... *wench*', to quote Jeff. But suddenly, the smile faded. A tear welled up in her eye, as she realised that all was not quite well...

Jeff still owed her fifty quid.

Another person having a lifestyle crisis at this crucial juncture in our tale was the evil dictator, Lord Rancydd of Skragg. Although he wasn't strictly anything to do with Jeff's troubled existence, he would soon set events in motion to make life a little more trying for our hapless human.

Approximately one hundred and thirty-five parsecs away, within the impressive cluster of youthful stars called the Pleiades, lay the Skraggi Empire. A gigantic, galaxy-wide kingdom, which had been ruled for millennia by a family of vindictive and savage rulers. The latest in the line was Lord Rancydd, victor of countless battles, murderer of billions and fearful god of war to every nearby system.

And father to Kelvin.

Lord Rancydd lay dying in his jewel-encrusted golden bed, his only son at his side. Kelvin was a little under thirty, thin and nervous, and unlike his father, he wasn't really the vindictive and savage type. True, he'd *read* about countless battles, *imagined* insulting millions and tried to be a fearful god of war to the next door neighbours' pets. But Kelvin was about to inherit the title Lord Rancydd the Third, Overlord of Skragg. In all honesty, he would rather have been reading magazines of dubious subject matter outside, in the garden shed.

On second thought, Lord Rancydd wasn't the one having difficulty in his life, as there was only about a minute left of it. Kelvin was the one going through the emotional mangle, buttocks-first. He sat beside the huge bed and watched the hours tick by as his five hundred year old father took thin gasps of air.

Back on Earth, it was two a.m. in the morning, and Jeff Spooner sat inside the garage staring up at Ray, with an empty feeling in his stomach. The reason for this feeling was literal – his stomach contents were outside the garage, doing a rather convincing Jackson Pollock impersonation.

Ray had helped Jeff clean up, and handed him a strong coffee, which helped, but not a lot, because he was looking at a scene which was chock-full of mind-boggle-ation; His local barber, building a spacecraft, inside a garage (out of what looked like wool - what *was* that odd smell?), and a small army's worth of explosives piled underneath the shell-shaped ship.

*Was Ray some kind of terrorist?* Jeff had to ask to get this issue out of the way. Tactfully, too. It wouldn't do to upset him.

"Are you some kind of terrorist, Ray? Like er... Al-Pacino... no, Al-Qaeda?"

Ray smiled warmly, rather unlikely for an AK-47

brandishing nutjob.

“No, of course not. Don't be ridiculous.”

This was a big relief. Jeff sighed and took a long sip of welcoming coffee.

“I'm an alien.”

Jeff's coffee left the way it went in, only twice as fast.

This had been quite a bizarre day for Jeff, all things considered, and if truth be told, for the High Priest of Emo Prime, M4 and M25 the dysfunctional Orbots, Reverend Wilson, Sarah the scum-queen, Glyn the barman and the crusty old dipso, Lord Rancydd Of Skragg and young Kelvin. Even Bobby McFerrin, on the other side of the world, wasn't feeling so chipper at that particular moment.

Only Ray seemed to be having a pretty normal sort of day. But at two in the morning, Jeff decided he might as well embrace the madness and go along with it. He resigned himself to the belief that, at some point, reason would soon slip back into the proceedings. Either that or a male nurse would top up his medication and re-tighten the straps.

“I think it's time I explained myself,” said Ray, pacing around the odd mottled spacecraft. Jeff could only smile weakly as coffee dripped from his chin.

“Right – you *aren't* imagining all this, I *am* an alien, and this is my only way off this planet,” he continued, pacing around.

Jeff looked at the insane craft and the deceptively sane barber. At this point, he could only assume that Ray had run through the crazy forest and hit every tree.

“Er...okay, Ray. But one question -”

“Only one?”

“Well, alright – a couple. How can you be an alien? I've known you for, well... at least ten years!”

Ray stopped pacing, and sat down on a wooden crate near Jeff.

"Firstly, my name isn't Ray. Well, it is, but that's only part of it."

"Er...oh-*kay* then. So, what's the rest of it?"

Ray took a deep breath of fresh dignity.

"My name is Barbaray Sprambladack Fasstalonscump."

Jeff couldn't help but snigger. Ray was prepared for this moment, thanks to his lungful of dignity, and so carried on regardless.

"I've been stranded here since the early eighties, when my ship— *this*," he indicated the craft, "got severely damaged by the atmosphere. Most of the outer shielding got burnt up, and I've been repairing it ever since."

"Repairing it? With what?"

"With this!" replied Ray, delving his hand into the black bin liner, and pulling out a large, itchy-looking clump of human hair.

"Keratin!" he exclaimed proudly. "The finest transgalactic insulation shielding known to lifekind!"

He sniffed the clump momentarily.

"Alright, so it smells a bit strange, but there's no denying its unique properties!"

Jeff suddenly realised the smell was this spacecraft, about the size of a Sherman Tank. It reeked of Brylcreem, shampoo and, well... hair. He had the weirdest urge to crack a joke.

"So this is your... *haircraft*?" he asked, with a big smug grin, "Your... *hairship*?" he continued, beginning to smirk.

Ray looked tiredly at him.

"Yes, Jeff. Hairplane, Hairliner, Hairodynamic Hairycopter. I've heard all the jokes. Long ago. And they weren't that funny then. Did you have some more questions?"

"Er, yeah," said Jeff. "Is that a pile of explosives underneath it? And if so, what the hell for? Are you trying

to kill yourself?" he asked incredulously, yet sensibly.

Ray stood up and pointed to the crates of highly explosive materials upon which the fibrous flying machine sat.

"These – are for initial thrust. I don't have the thrust capability to escape the Earth's basic gravity field, so I have to use the crude explosive force of this material to get me up into the air, and from there, I can pilot it out into free space."

Jeff widened his eyes. Each new answer managed to freak him out even more than the last.

"You mean to tell me, you're gonna get inside that – that *thing*, and blow yourself sky-"

"-Sky high, Yes! Exactly!" concluded Ray with a smile that defied sanity.

"Once airborne, the wondrous properties of Keratin take over, and *whoosh!* Off I go!"

He embellished the statement with a particularly enthusiastic hand gesture, meant to symbolise a rocket *whooshing* up into the sky. In actual fact, it resembled a Nazi salute.

To the casual observer, the spaceship looked like an oversized Brillo pad. Measuring about thirty feet in length, at least twelve feet high and about twenty feet wide, it was a finely-woven mass of thin hairs, twisted and thatched, with no visible means of propulsion or wings. It was pointed at the front end, so it sort of resembled an upturned rowing boat – only knitted from fine wool. Just beneath the outer layer of hair, there was what looked more like a conventional spacecraft - an inner shell of metal with glass portholes. A closer analogy would be an army tank in a tea-cosy. A small array of computers with the standard flashing lights graced the inner walls of the cabin. In all, it was the sort of impossible-to-behold sight that would get one carted off to the funny farm double-

quick time, if one ever tried to tell somebody important about it.

Jeff quickly realised this, and shook the marbles inside his skull.

"Alright, hang on. Suppose you *do* actually get into orbit – where the hell are you gonna go? Have you got oxygen? Warp-drive? A bog, even?"

He was feeling like a non-swimming dwarf who had just been flung into the Mariana Trench.

Ray tried his best to explain.

"Look, it's quite elementary, to be honest: Keratin is made up of billions of cells that react to the vacuum of space and they form a nearly impregnable shield against radiation, cold and space debris. But the best thing about it is – it's like a living solar panel – I can sail on the solar winds indefinitely, at unimaginable speeds! No need to refuel, ever!"

"What about oxygen?"

"I have a recycling unit. Provides water, too!"

"The bog?"

"Chemical toilet. £27.99, EBay."

"Oh. So much for alien tech, then. Weren't you off to Canada though?"

"Not quite," said Ray. "Kangazang. My home planet. Lovely place, I'm telling you... beaches of pure chrome." He sighed a little homesick sigh.

Jeff had heard enough. He took a deep breath of fresh sanity, and smiled falsely as he stood up to face Ray. *Or was it Barbaray Sprungdiddly Wotsit? Whatever.* He wanted to go home and lie down for a bit. A month would do it.

"Okay, well, cheers for that, mate. All the best with the big bang and all that," he began, but Ray put a hand on his shoulder, which made Jeff want to soil his undergarments.

"Jeff, I need your help. I can't pilot this thing alone."

Jeff trembled. "This has got to be the part," he thought,

“Where I get probed somewhere sensitive, or Ray rips his skin off to reveal a bulbous pulsating walnut... hopefully on his shoulders.”

“Come on, Jeff,” said Ray, sounding like a bar-room buddy who wanted to get a round in, “Think about it; you need a holiday. Why not take a trip to the stars and back? I can drop you off anywhere you like!”

Jeff considered it.

“Anywhere?” he asked.

“Anywhere - except Pluto, Ganymede, Tau Ceti, Emo Prime... and Swansea.”

“Why not Swansea?”

“Have you *been* to Swansea?”

“Oh, right. Fair point.”

“So - what do you say,” beamed Ray, “Are you coming along? It’ll be fun - And I’ll throw in free haircuts! What have you got to lose?”

It was a tempting offer to a lovelorn, tipsy loser at nearly three in the morning.

Jeff had a quick think, and his conscience postulated some theories:

He could get space-sick.

He could get lost forever.

He could be killed by some alien menace.

He could die.

“Oh, what the hell? Let’s go for it.” he replied.