

# THE COMING OF THE ZARTANGS

Philip Gilliver



## 1. the sarcastic cat

I return home and there is a cat on my sofa who tells me that humans as a species will soon no longer exist.

But first, there's this...

It begins when I arrive at work - late again. It's not my fault the store opens before I wake up everyday. The shop is called Buymors by the way. There is a very good reason why I work there, it is because alcohol costs money, and I need alcohol in order to forget things like life is shit, and humanity is a complete waste of an idea.

The minute my foot passes the doorway, I get told off by the assistant manager Mr. Polenorth. I tell him to sod off. There are two very good reasons for this, he is not only my supervisor, but my brother-in-law, and also the sight of his face every weekday morning makes me want to puke.

He tells me once again in his whining, tiresome voice, that there are no such things as excuses in retail, because standards have to be maintained, and he is my boss.

‘If it wasn’t for me,’ he reminds me yet again, as if I ever could be interested in the scented garbage that comes out of his mouth, ‘you wouldn’t have a job. You would not be stacking fresh fruit and vegetable produce at Buymors, but sitting on your sticky sofa, eating out-of-date breakfast cereal from the box and watching all-day breakfast TV washed down by flat lager.’

And his point is...?

'Thank you for that,' I say anyway, but the sarcasm goes to waste, as he has already pulled a broom from his bottom, for me with which to sweep the stockroom. He hands it to me, with the kind of grin that just says *Please punch me in the face.*

'And when you've finished that,' he says using his most official even whinier tone, 'get some more turnips from out back. We're running low, and if you're late again, it'll go to the top office and you'll be gone.'

And he storms off, missing the barrage of the witty and rude names I fire off in his direction.

Not that I don't like working in that terrible, mind-numbing, shitty little place - alright I hate it. Every day is the same. You pick things up and you put them somewhere else. Then you have to find something else to do, while you're

waiting for the pile to go down. When it does, you have to do the same thing over and over again. People shouldn't buy things. It's bad for my sanity. But they keep doing it, regardless. They buy vegetables and then I have to go out back and pile them back up again. Never work with the general public, they are bastards.

The only thing worse than that is the tills. That annoying, incessant beeping that never, ever stops. Worse still, are the people in the queues complaining, because, as you don't like working on the tills, you take your own sweet time and say rude things to them, and they don't like that. They toddle off to customer complaints. This is why I keep taking my name badge off.

I finish sweeping the stockroom, and drag another pallet of turnips out to the shop floor and make up the pile again.

When will they ever see sense and give me the

bloody sack, I'm thinking, and then there is a message over the intercom, for me to call into the manager's office. Someone up there has heard me.

Our store manager is called Mr. Crimp. He is a small, chubby man with a six-inch wide parting on the top of his head.

'He would have kept it quiet,' he grumbles, and his double chin vibrates as he speaks. 'Your so-called brother-in-law, would have let it slide. But nothing escapes me Lotterby. I see you, traipsing in at five past nine in the morning...'

'Quarter-past!' I correct him.

'... with your store jacket all done up wrong, and your jeans hanging down past your buttocks, because you've got dressed on the bus again.'

'It's only fifteen minutes,' I say pathetically, 'What am I going to miss in fifteen minutes? There's only about four customers in about

then.'

'You need to be here at 8.30 lad, not quarter-past!' his voice goes up and I jump. But only because such volume was not meant to come out of something so small and round, in my opinion. Unless you are an opera singer.

'You've been asking for this,' Polenorth intervenes, 'I keep telling him Mr. Crimp, keep this up and one day...' This is just him trying to save face. He could have turned me in days ago. I've been employed at Buymors for almost a week now, and he said not a word before this.

'Shut up Polenorth!' Crimp growls.

'Just saying that's all,' mumbles Polenorth.

'Anyway, it gives me no pleasure saying this,' Crimp lies, 'given the current social and economical climate, but you're sacked!'

The Shockwave hits me swiftly, and unexpectedly, like the 4.32 to Leeds. 'Pardon



me?’

‘Sacked!’

‘This is illegal! What about my fortnight’s trial?’

‘Forget it!’ cries Crimp. ‘I’ve changed my mind, bugger off, and do not darken Buymors doorstep again!’

‘You can’t do this,’ I plead. ‘How am I going to live? I can’t go on the dole. I hate cheap lager.’

‘You’re your own worst enemy.’ Freakishly, these words come from both Crimp and Polenorth at exactly the same time, and they look at each other blankly.

Any words uttered by anyone in the office after that, aren’t worth reporting. However, as I am being escorted out of the store by Buymors would-be employee of the month and two security guards, I make a very disturbing, yet interesting discovery. I notice that the store fitters are in again rearranging things. Some

more of the tills have been boarded off, leaving only three tills to accommodate the whole of the north of England.

‘What’s that all about?’ I exclaim, and for a second we stop.

‘Never mind that,’ says Polenorth, ‘that is no concern of yours whatsoever.’

The penny drops. ‘This is nothing to do with me being late every single day since I started, or being rude to customers, or using long cucumbers as lightsabers and them breaking in half and me having to throw them in the big bins before anyone notices, this is about getting rid of staff, and going completely self-service.

It's all true, the robots are taking over. Soon nobody will have a job. Then when all the staff are gone they'll turned on us. It will just be robots buying veg from robots.

We, the shop-workers of the world, are about to

be taken over, rendered obsolete by the expansion of mechanization. Everybody's buying what they want online now. Open your eyes Oliver. This is the end of man and the beginning of the world of the machines.'

'Rubbish!' says Polenorth. He doesn't believe that. I can hear it in his voice. 'If you'd have shown a little more commitment to being on time and being a model employee, you'd still have a job. Now I'm going to have to tell your sister, that you've lost the only job you've ever had since you left school, and after four days too.'

To be fair, that was only twenty years ago.

I take one last look inside, as the automatic doors close behind me for my final time as a member of Buymor's staff. Polenorth shakes his head as he waves me off, while the security guards pat each other on the back, another good

job done, another unwelcome particle of humanity ejected from their wonderful, perfect little store. Those two disappointed brain cell transplant waiting list buffoons, just love following people around the store, to see if they put their hands in their trousers. Not that I hadn't shoplifted there often before on many occasions, prior to submitting my application.

They'll be sorry when they find themselves as tea boys for androids.

I don't know what I am going to say to Steph. She is my big sister. All through my life, she has always kept me on the straight and narrow, by whacking me on the back of the head repeatedly at regular intervals. True, my balance has gone to shit as a result of this, and occasionally, I wake up in the night screaming for no apparent reason, but she is my sister, I love her and don't like letting her down.

Strange, but as I approach my house, there is flickering light coming from within, and the recognisable sound of screeching tyres and sirens coming from speakers. The TV is on. I never leave the TV on, when there is nobody around looking at it, it's a waste of money. Then I only have it on at all for seperation. Everybody knows the government use your telly so that they can keep tags on your buying habits.

This is so, very peculiar.

My feet approach the front door warily. My key goes into the lock, as if time, has somehow slowed. Gingerly, I turn the handle, push the door gently and make my way in the general direction of this unexpected commotion, of course grabbing the first thing I can get my mits on, en route, my lightweight, retractable umbrella.

I stand in the doorway, waving my sad weapon

this way and that, expecting to see someone vacate my home in a panic. But there is no one there at all. I put down Excalibur and begin undoing the buttons on my jacket. But as I reach the third one down, I stop dead. The TV mysteriously switches channels all by itself, and someone curses the quality of the movie they are watching. Magically, one of those antiques programs appears. The ones where you take your belongings to some old geezer, who quite frankly tells you it's not worth pissing on.

Something says, 'That's more like it!' There is an old woman, with a very ancient looking clock. The antiques expert is already sucking air through his dentures, and preparing her for the worst.

There is someone on my sofa, watching my TV, I am thinking, some sort of midget poltergeist. Slowly, I circumnavigate my sofa, keen to solve

this perplexing mystery, as soon as humanly possible. However, my eyes are not prepared for the sight they are met with - it's a cat, a cat is holding my TV remote in its paws. Now this is bloody clever, as cats don't have opposable thumbs.

'Having a nice time?' I muse.

The cat, if that is what it really is, does not answer me at first. It is an ignorant, talking cat.

But if there is one thing I've learnt in my thirty-seven years of existence, it's that just when you think something can't happen, it turns up and bites you in the bits.

'Hello?' I say, 'can I help you?' The creature does not appreciate the irony of the fact, that at this point, I'm still wearing my Buymors *Here to Help You* badge, which I had to put on to go to the office to speak to Crimp.

'Finally,' it rants. 'You're back!'

‘Had the day become more successful,’ I inform him, ‘I would still be at work, forming artichokes into a neat pyramid.’

‘Listen!’ it demands, ‘I have something very important to say to you.’

‘Would you mind if I have a drink first?’ I chance, ‘I know it’s still early, but I’ve had some rather disappointing news, which as it appears has resulted in giving me hallucinations.’

‘Drink what?’ it enquires. ‘What do the people of your planet drink?’

I pick up a half bottle of scotch from the bookcase and wave it in the air.

‘What is that curious substance?’ It says honing in on the amber fluid.

‘12-year old single malt!’ I say. ‘Not the good stuff. I’m reliably informed that they put paraffin in at the distillery, to make it go further.’



The cat shakes its head. To the best of my knowledge, this is the first cat ever, to turn down an alcoholic beverage.

‘Now, so what is it you wanted to tell me?’

The cat is surprisingly nimble. His hands are somehow able to manipulate the buttons on my remote with notable skill. The volume goes up.

I retrieve one of last night’s dirty glasses from the coffee table, unscrew the lid of the bottle and pour in some of the amber liquid, and without another thought, take a gulp. It tastes disgusting, yet that has never stopped me from purchasing the wretched stuff in the past. My head starts wobbling already.

‘Did you hear me?’ I say again. ‘What do you want to tell me?’

‘Finish your drink!’ the cat is demanding. ‘Let me finish observing this interesting documentary of your planet.’

'You keep saying that, what do you mean?'

'What do you mean, what do I mean?'

I take another gulp, my head is getting used to it, then another, and another.

'You keep using the words, *your planet*. What do you mean by that, are you saying you are a cat from another planet, like the planet of the cats, where cats drive buses, deliver the mail, make pies and 'sell you car insurance over the phone?'

'No!' the cat is becoming quite irritated.

'You just referred to The Antiques, Bargain Show, as a documentary of my planet.'

'As a species, I can see that the receptors in your ears aren't very well developed.' Its tone was changing. It really didn't want me interrupting his program, despite the fact it was my TV it is watching it on. 'I did not say that I was a cat from another planet.'

'So you aren't from space, then? Do you have

batteries?”

At this point it turns its head around 180 degrees, something I never knew felines could do, owls, yes, cat's no.

‘I apologise,’ it says humbly, ‘the information I received must be erroneous. We were led to believe that humans, were the intellectually superior species of Earth.’

‘You lost me. You aren't a cat?’

‘At present!’ Annoyed, it switches the TV off. ‘I am a visitor to your world, not a cat. The cat is my present form.’

‘Just tell me!’ I am getting frustrating now. Scotch has a peculiar effect on me. It makes me want to hit things which disagree with me. ‘I want my house back. I want to drink the rest of... this, and then collapse on my sofa, which for some inexplicable reason seems currently under feline occupation.’

Abandoning the glass, I start gulping from the bottle. There is something more satisfying, about getting all of the contents in my mouth all in one go. I am already mourning the half of it that has now gone.

I perch my bottom on the edge of the armchair, my buttocks struggle for comfort. I stare at the cat, and the cat at me.

‘I don’t care if I’m looking at a feline, or a tiny midget in a cat costume. Tell me what you need to tell me.’

‘Very well!’ it says at last. ‘Your world is about to be invaded, and you are all going to be eaten.’

‘By what?’ I chance after a reflective pause, ‘more - cats?’

‘Tell me,’ its voice becomes more laced with sarcasm by each second. ‘Are you an adult of your kind, or is there a parent or guardian I can talk to?’

This is it, the straw which breaks the camel's back. The sarcastic, hairy little bastard has crossed the line. I am no longer in control of what I do. I grab the cat, the tiny person in the furry costume, whatever it is, and hurl it across the room. There is a streak of orange across the floor. My drunken eyes are unable to follow it into the kitchen, it's too fast. The cat flap clatters as something shoots through it.

'Why have I got a sodding cat flap?' I ask myself as my body falls onto the sofa. 'I haven't got a cat!' and then I fall into a black stupor..

2. big sis

Steph is furious about me losing my job. She tells me I am a loser, a no-hoper, a wastrel, a ne'er do well, a dole-dosser, a creep, a lowlife, a bum, a vagabond, an oxygen thief and a scoundrel. My sister has a much broader

vocabulary than me.

We meet in the coffee shop at the local library, at eleven. The library is on the verge of closing. That'll be the robots wanting to take over, that and nobody wants to borrow books anymore, not from robots anyway. What would robots even write about?

Sadly, society has abandoned the traditional, in favour of the irritatingly convenient. The poor people who run the cafe will have no income, and will probably starve to death or will have to become robot polishers.

On the plus side though, as they have to get rid of their stock, they are selling the tea and coffee for next to nothing.

Result!

The walls have dark patches on where they have already started taking down the artwork.

'Why?' she asks, 'when Oliver pulled out all the

stops for you, do you go and do this?’

‘By pulling out all the stops you mean, he asked the boss if his brother-in-law can have a job, and the boss said yes.’

‘They weren’t even taking on,’ she says, slurping anxiously at her cup. Steph likes the kinds of coffee you need a degree in Italian to order over the counter. ‘Yet Ollie was able to convince Mr. Crimp, that you would be a valuable contribution to the team. That is not an easy task, by any stretch of the imagination.’

Obviously, I need to change the subject fast. ‘Hey Steph!’ I say, ‘have you...’ I stop to think about what I could possibly say next. ‘Have you, had any nice... haircuts lately?’

‘Really?’ she sneers over the brim.

‘What do you think about the library closing?’ I try that, ‘bummer isn’t it? No more books.’

‘Try again!’

'I had a visitor last night,' I say, 'and he told me something very important. I say *he*, it could have been a *she*. It sounded like a *he*. Unless it was a female, with a slightly masculine voice'

'What are you blathering on about?'

'The...'

I think, again, it's ludicrous and preposterous to even imagine, but it comes out anyway, '...cat!'

'Cat?' Steph screws her eyes up. 'A cat gave you some news?'

I nod like an idiot. 'Yes!'

'Alright, and what did this... cat say?'

'Ah, but it wasn't a cat,' I correct her.

'You just said it was.'

'I know, but it wasn't one.' I notice her eyelids narrowing. This is very familiar to me. It is the prelude to violence

'Don't hit me sis, let me explain!' I try not to listen too much, to the words coming out of my



mouth. It could only make things worse. 'It said it had assumed a cat-like form.'

'Wait,' Steph pulls the weirdest face, and over the years she has built up quite a gallery. 'You lost me, what assumed a cat-like form?'

I pause. What harm could it do? 'The erm... alien!'

'The alien?' she laughs, or at least I think it's a laugh. It sounds more manic, like someone strangling a duck, than anything that could be called an expression of fun.

'Yes!' my voice acquires helium from somewhere.

'An alien comes billions of miles across the cosmos, to tell you, something important, and it chooses the form of a cat? Why? When cats aren't even supposed to even have the power of speech.'

'Cat flap!' I pip. 'The front door was locked. It

was the only way it could get into the house.'

'Ok,' Steph's eyebrows do a sort of Mexican wave thing. 'Humour me, little brother, what important information did the alien cat fly all across the cosmos to Drabwich North, to relate to a recently unemployed shelf-stacker?'

'We are going to die, Steph,' I plead, 'we're all going to be eaten by aliens from another planet!'

Steph laughs, why wouldn't she? 'Really?' she says when she stops. I know she's humouring me, but I don't really care that much now. I just want to get away.

'Martians?'

'I've no idea Steph!'

'You mean you didn't ask?'

'I didn't get the chance.' I pick up my tea. It's cold now. 'I...'

'You..?'

‘Attacked it and it ran off!’

Steph stands up. Quite obviously she’s had enough of this fairy tale. ‘You want to take my attention away from you losing your bloody job, and that’s the best you can come up with?’

‘It’s the truth!’

‘Grow up Adrian!’ she leaves abruptly. By the door, she promises to phone me. I know exactly what this means, another bloody trip to the job hunters club.

I look around the café, to meet a lot of strange glances. An awkward smile does nothing to put this right, so without looking back, I get up and go.

It’s hardly surprising people think I’m insane. I think that myself. On the way home, I make a vow to myself, to never drink again, to stay sober, at least until Friday.

I stop by the town hall, where I sit and watch all

the innocent people drift past doing their normal daily things, working, shopping, looking after their children. This is the unstoppable circle of human life that nothing can break. My chest begins to swell with pride in humanity. Then the thought of what is going to happen, deflates me again. I must tell somebody, the next person who comes in front of my face, and there is one question haunting what's left of my brain, now. Out of seven and a half billion people on the planet, why me?

I'm about to get up from the bench and someone sits down, a man in his mid to late thirties like me. He seems nice enough. He smiles and opens up a conversation about the weather. He says it might rain. He's probably thinking about the plants. People who talk to plants, are quite sensitive about the environment, and are quite possibly insane. He

also has ginger hair. I have my theories about ginger-haired people who talk to plants. This is someone who just might believe me.

I begin, but pitch low.

‘Do you ever wonder, what would happen if all of this were to end?’

He replies, ‘No, not really!’

‘Well, I do.’

He puts his hand in his carrier bag and pulls out a bag of mint imperials. He offers the bag to me. I take one, and toss it casually into my mouth. It hits the back of my throat. I nearly choke.

‘What's that?’ he says after I have finished gagging.

‘Funny you should ask. I bet the dinosaurs said the same thing as they saw that bloody great meteorite racing towards them, not that dinosaurs could talk of course. I’m saying if they

could, they probably thought, they would be the dominant creatures on the planet forever. They wouldn't have even thought, that some gigantic rock could come out of nowhere and piss on their bonfire.'

'But that's not going to happen to us,' he smiles inanely. 'The weatherman only mentioned rain.' I look into his face, and see nothing at all behind his eyes, but bluebirds, butterflies and singing nuns. 'This might sound better over several drinks,' I advise him.

The next thing, we are in the Dog and Whistle experiencing the other side of humanity, the ones who don't want to play ball with society, job joggers, wastrels, pond life, drunks, my kind of people.

The bloke is sitting there with his diet cola, me with my pint of Pilsner lager, 6%. On the table, is also my spare pint of Pilsner, my double

bourbon whiskey, my spare double bourbon whiskey, all the aforementioned and a bag of dry-roasted peanuts, to save me a trip to the bar for the next forty minutes.

‘What’s your name?’ I ask him. Nice timing, somebody’s put heavy metal on the jukebox. He doesn’t hear me. A bit louder ‘What’s your name?! You haven’t told me your name!’ He still doesn’t tell me. ‘I’m Adrian!’ I hold out my hand. All he does is nod at it politely.

‘I can’t stay long!’ he yells back, ‘things to do!’

‘Are you off to polish your dahlias?’ He doesn’t hear me. Here I am trying to tell a stranger over a pint, that the end of the world is about to happen, and we can’t even hear each other.

‘We’re all going to die, cheers!’ I yell with a crazy smile, and neck the first pint in exactly five seconds, a new record for me.

When the music finally stops, I try again. ‘You

don't drink do you?' I view his glass. He's only taken the tiniest sip off the top. The ice has barely begun even thinking of melting.

The stranger shakes his head. He is happy about that.

'This might be a good day to...' The barman turns a knob under the bar and the music is even louder. 'Bloody hell!' I tug his arm and guide him and my drinks arsenal, into the beer garden.

'Look,' he says, 'I'm going to have to go soon.'

'What I'm about to tell you, is really important!'

'Which is what?'

I look around and see clueless faces all having a good time, going about their business.

'Yes, you are absolutely right, you do want to go home,' I say with passion and conviction. 'You want to go home and embrace your loved ones while you still can. And if it is entirely possible,



find them a safe place to hide. Something is coming. I don't know what, but I am reliably informed, that something very bad is going to happen. If you have a gun, you might want to think about shooting them. Far worse is on the way, believe you me.'

'Informed,' he is quizzical, 'by whom?'

I think about it. 'Never mind, just go home, kiss your wife, or your husband, your plants or your gun or whatever. Tell them you love them. Because it might be the last time you get a chance to do that.'

He looks at me with mad eyes. 'What is coming?'

'Aliens!' I cringe.

He downs his cola. 'Thank you very much for the drink,' he says, 'but I am going home, much to do.'

'Wait!' I call after his rapidly disappearing body.

I shrug, and take a gulp of my whiskey. This stuff tastes disgusting. Why the hell do I let that stuff past my gob? I finish it all, then regardless of the taste, order more. The world is going to end and there is no one on Earth who will believe a hopeless drunken wretch like me. Depressing to think, I even haven't got anyone at home to kiss goodbye.

After another couple of drinks, I phone my sister. 'Steph!'

'What do you want Adrian?' her voice buzzes in my ear hole like a wasp trapped in a coffee jar.

'Guess what sis? I bloody love you!'

'You're drunk Adrian. It's only just nearly midday, and you're drunk!'

'Listen,' I attempt the enormously impossible task of sounding sober in a pub. 'Pack your things and head to the mountains, sis, either that or under ground, I can never remember.'

‘What mountains?’

‘I don’t know, high ones, big high ones, bigger than a bungalow. Take the kids, or some people that you love, and find mountains. Mountains are solid and will protect you.’

‘Is this anything to do with the crap you told me earlier? Sober up and find a job Adrian!’

‘But sis, I want you to be safe. Don’t take Oliver though, he’s a tool. Tools deserve to die! Not useful tools though, they’re handy for doing jobs around the house!’

‘I’m hanging up Adrian.’ The familiar raspy voice turns into the disappointing purr of a dead connection, and I am all alone.

As I exit the pub, I am greeted by the voices of angels. It isn’t for me, there is an award ceremony going on in the town hall, and they’ve got a choir singing on the balcony.

On the way home, or rather, stumbling in what

I hope would be the direction of my house, something grabs me from behind, and throws my ropey, useless carcass into a darkened alleyway.

I take out my change. It isn't much, but whoever it is who is mugging me can have it. There will soon be no use for it. I look up and view a familiar face, the chap with the plants.

'You!' I exclaim in disbelief. 'You're a mugger?' Then he does something that just an hour prior to this event, I wouldn't have believed he'd do, he punches me square on the mouth.

'That is for throwing me across the room!' he rants.

'You!'

'All you had to do, one simple thing, tell your leaders that the Zartangs are coming, and you respond by getting hammered.'

'Oh, you are the cat, the alien cat! Ow,' my lips

sting. Blood drips onto my shirt. 'Listen,' I remember something interesting. 'We aren't going to get caught out anyway. We have very sensitive tracking systems that can pick up objects in space billions of miles away. If it was going to happen, NASA would know by now.'

My friendly, confident smile is quite weak. I realise what just came out, probably sounded like one, long, incomprehensible, drunken slur.

'You fool!' the alien man-cat rants. 'Do you not think, that somewhere in this utterly complex universe, there might possibly be sophisticated life forms, that might have technology to get past these things unseen?'

I can't think of anything to say, that wouldn't sound like crap, so I just shrug. 'I thought you were going home!'

'That isn't possible you fool, the Zartangs have taken all my people.'

‘Sorry to hear that!’ I lie, well sort of.

‘They did what they will do to your world. They will fatten you up, slice you into pieces and move on to another world, where they will fatten the inhabitants of that world with *your* flesh.’

‘Right!’ I exclaim. ‘Only one thing for it. You’d better come home with me then!’

### 3. the coming of the zartangs

A curious sound separates my eyelids. It is like nothing I've ever heard before, nothing on Earth. It's halfway between an eagle squawking because it's about to lay an unfeasibly large, triangular egg and has haemorrhoids, and the world's largest vacuum cleaner.

I look towards the window in my room, and for several seconds everything goes black. Some gigantic object has swallowed the sun. I am quite used to things in the sky. The police helicopter is always flying over looking for scallywags who pinch cars. It doesn't feel like that at all, not natural.

I think about what the cat said, about being fattened up and eaten. My alien friend is in the next room. I still don't know what planet he is from, he hasn't told me, planet of the snoring

people by the sound of it. The hubbub wakes him too. He bursts into my room.

‘They’re here!’ he yells in a panic. We are going to die!’

‘Quick!’ I yell back. ‘We’ve gotta get out of here!’

‘To go where exactly?’

‘I don’t know! You’re spaceship! You must have got here somehow. What do you say, you and I leave this world and go to another planet that supports life?’

‘The Zartangs have used up the resources on every single planet with breathable air. Anyway, there would be nowhere to go.’

‘Wait!’ I cry, ‘I have an auntie Bethany in Scarborough. She runs a B & B. She’ll put us up and she makes a mean fry up!’ I’m not thinking straight. She died last year. One fry up too many.

‘You are an idiot!’ I am informed. ‘However, my



ship might be a good place to go, until all the excitement is over.'

'Great!' I exclaim, and a warm molecule of hope drops into my heart. He leads me out of the house and down the garden, where I couldn't help but notice the absence of anything extraterrestrial-looking. Then I notice that next door's heavily creosoted fence has been flattened, as are most of the neighbours'.

'There!' my new friend, my would-be saviour points at the hedge that separates mine and Mr. Thorpe's gardens.

'You mean, you came here in my hedge?'

'My ship is beyond the hedge, and also in front of it. Look not with your eyes, but with your mind.' After thinking he adds, 'I mean it's invisible. The environmental blanket keeps it from being seen.' He takes something out of his pocket, a small remote and aims it at thin air. A

doorway appears which opens to expose an interior of flashing lights and panels and a long metal gangplank emerges, unravelling like an enormous silver tongue. 'Behold - I give you... the Decrepit!'

That must mean something else where he comes from.

One thing that occurs to me on crossing the threshold of his mysterious spacecraft, was this might all just be part of some bizarre Saturday night, beer-saturated, hallucinogenic nightmare, that I might not have woken up from yet. 'Explain how this blanket thingy is going to protect us from these What-Wangs.' I say anyway.

'It protects us by taking millions of images of whatever is around us, and projects it back,' says the alien. 'However, it will not be able to do that for long. The power cells which enable the

projector to work, are diminishing fast. When they burn out, we will be seen, and we will be food for our new visitors.'

'But that doesn't matter because we can fly somewhere else right?'

'They will find us wherever we go!'

He still hasn't told me his name. It probably isn't that important yet.

'So how long will the power last?'

He tells me, although I hoped in a way that he wouldn't. 'How long is, The Antiques, Bargain Show?'

'An hour!'

'Four of those back to back!' he exclaims.

My pickled brain does the maths. Five hours, that is not good.

I glance around at all of the flashing things that make the interior seem so alive with electricity.

'Can't you divert power to the blanket thingy

from somewhere else?’

‘The blanket works on a different system. It’s designed as a failsafe for crash landing on an unexplored world. If the engines are damaged, it is supposed to come on automatically. But this is not the first world the Decrepit has visited, and power doesn’t last forever.’

‘We must get more power,’ I chirrup, ‘Buymors sells batteries. What type do you need?’

But I am informed by the mouth of the horse, that this type of energy would be useless.

‘Vegetables!’ he says, finally. ‘Do you know of a place I can find vegetables?’

My mind wanders from the interplanetary vehicle and into the fridge in my kitchen. I could imagine the contents quite vividly. There are absolutely no green things in my fridge. They are forbidden. I hate them. They don't taste like anything. Vegetables are pretend food,

mock food, pseudo food.

However, for the first time ever, I wish I had thought to bring my work home with me.

'Buymors do them too,' I say.

'Are you sure?' Spouts the alien.

'Positive!'

'What do you do with them?'

'Eat them!' I say and the alien's face screws up into a ball.

'That's disgusting!' it replies sourly and I realise we have more in common than I originally thought.

The next thing I know, I am walking down the road, drifting sort of, like something was going to swoop out of the sky at any minute and carry me off to some nest and feed me to its massive chicks.

The air around me seems colder somehow, not like it was this morning, as if the something

that was going to swoop out of the sky, wanted me chilled off first so I wouldn't go off.

This isn't the only thing that is different. The end of the street has apparently gone missing. You can no longer see Bowen Street or Manning Drive. It is almost as if the town had become divided overnight, and some fascist general has erected an enormous black wall.

Then, as I draw nearer it all becomes clear. It isn't a wall at all, but a great black building, only one large enough to fit Buymors inside it fifty or quite possibly a hundred times over.

The exterior is shiny. It reflects the yellow street lamps that the council forget to switch off in the early hours. There are no windows to be seen and no entrance, yet I know that this is obviously an alien spaceship belonging to those terrible What-Wangs or whatever they are called. It is a cuboid shape like a house brick,

only the kind of house brick filled with things that could quite possibly scare the shit out of you.

I had a dilemma on, it is blocking my path. Do I attempt to go around it and risk getting set upon by whatever it is that is inside that thing, or do I return to the alien and say Buymor's had sold out?

Everywhere is so peaceful. I am wondering why there was nobody on the street screaming, or no military vehicles bombarding it with missiles. Nothing that has happened since my sacking has made sense.

Heroism has never been for me, there is too much effort involved in that, and I haven't got a cape. Also a guy can get hurt.

With all of the possible scenarios running through my head, I am sorely tempted to abandon this folly forthwith. Then the strangest

sight meets me, as my head turns and I look through one of my neighbour's windows. Whenever there is the slightest commotion outside it can always be guaranteed that Mrs. Bailey would be the first to stick her neck through the door. Mrs. Bailey is an old busybody and a vigilant member of our neighbourhood watch. Yet there she is sitting in her armchair just staring at the wall, as still as breeze block.

The door is ajar. She keeps it that way because she thinks her cat is too important to use a rear entrance. I give the door a gentle push and it opens with a creak to the extent of its hinges and the handle clatters against the wall.

I enter the living room, half expecting her to screech at me to get out, but there she is, glued to the furniture and doing a fairly passable impersonation of a waxwork model of old



Mother Hubbard. Her eyes are wide open like she died like that, only she is still breathing, her chest wheezes like an old accordion. I am wondering now if anybody else is like this.

Time, I think, to look through some more windows. As I pass each one there is still life within, each one a macabre replica of the one before, people sitting and staring into space. I wonder what it was that I did, to escape that.

Then something hits me. If every other human being on the planet is this weird, and still like this, then I can do absolutely what I sodding well like. Perhaps I can just go on and be a hero after all.

I press on, assessing my best route past the alien brick. Closer inspection, reveals that the left hand side doesn't block off as much as the right side. This is, stock up time.

My chubby body just about squeezes around

the wall of the ship, and the wall of the primary school it is close to. After what must have been a whole minute at least of scraping and pushing, I emerge triumphantly on the other side. As soon as I'm clear of the big black monstrosity I break into a jog, or the nearest I can get to one in my condition. It's the willingness to get that ship as far to my back as was humanly possible. But my legs aren't built for moving very far.

Then I see it, a shiny, red Ferrari Enzo. There is someone in the driving seat but that is no problem. Just minutes later I am driving off, leaving him lying on his back with his legs, still in the seated position clasping an invisible steering wheel. No that I have a car, I can take the long way there.

Beaming, I pull up in front of Buymors. The idea about doing what I am about to do gives me a tremendous thrill, which for a moment at

least, helps me forget about the end of days. Stuff what I am about to do, up your pipe Mr. Crimp I am thinking as my body passes through the automatic doors. There is no sign of anyone at all, no one at the tills, no one mopping up spillages on aisle three, no one wheeling laden pallets, no one, which is kind of what the company had in mind for the future.

I am pushing the largest of the store's trolleys, the deep ones which always make you think you've shrunk, the ones you stick your kids in, and they can kick you in the knackers while you shop. And it is like a kid that I'm feeling, as my eyes scan the whole shop in one sweep. After a heavy, heart-filled sigh, I begin. Starting with the electrical goods I select the most expensive of our Blu-ray players, although at the time, it doesn't occur to me, to get the discs to play on it.

To go with this, I throw in copious amounts of beer, pizza, nuts, crisps, southern coated chicken, then there are the clothes I could never afford. I selected the most ludicrous shirts, the most expensive jeans, trainers, tee-shirts, things I don't think I will ever need, but look good anyway, items I have picked up for the sheer damn hell of it, even though I don't know what I am going to do with them.

I return to the car beaming, then my face landslides, when I remember that as usual fashion, not come out with what I went in for. This is why women make lists. I return for the vegetables; bags of sprouts, carrots, potatoes, onions, leeks. Then I view the space in the front passenger seat and compare it with the contents of the trolley and say 'Shit!'

The alien is pissed off, when he sees the fruits of my labour. He asks me where the vegetables

are. I hold up a sad bag of sprouts and grin like a complete idiot.

#### 4. the female survivor

My first night on the alien's ship has given me a stiff neck. He has not spoken much to me, apart from 'Thank you for the miniscule bag of sprouts, that'll give us about four seconds power,' which I am quite sure is sarcasm, something else we have in common.

He has told me his name - it is Klaa, which sounds to me like someone with their head down the toilet after a dodgy kebab. Speaking of which, the sprouts he tells me, will actually keep the blanket on until eleven this evening. After that, we are visible to all and sundry and easy pickings for our visitors. Tonight I am to return, and avoid the more interesting aisles at all cost. Since my blunder at the supermarket yesterday, Klaa has been odd with me. He is really irritating me. He transforms himself into this

disgusting orange blob with too many arms and eyes. He tells me it is his natural form. I'm not sure I believe him. This creature has nine buttocks. I have seen his seat in the cockpit and done the physics. It doesn't add up.

Fed up, I go back to the house to get out of his way. My guess is, that if the little bastard's defences go down like he says, these other aliens will be able to pick him up. I'm hoping that in the back of that cocky little mind, there is a plan hatching to make things better on Earth. It is a tall order.

I shouldn't look out of the window, but really want to. Some morbid fascination makes me. Yet when I do, it isn't something horrible, yet still disturbing. Every, single person my street has awoken from stagnation and is now standing in one straight line on the footpath. They are facing the same way, the direction of

the black ship. They are like automatons, shop front mannequins waiting for someone to come along and shove the latest seasonal fashions on them. Ashamedly, I want to laugh, they look hilarious like that. Not one of them had a good word to say about me when they weren't stiff and robotic. Five words are singing in my mind, who's the daddy now then?

I report my findings to Klaa.

'It means the Zartangs have started phase two,' he says as he punches away at some seemingly unresponsive buttons on a wall panel. He is now not a cat, the man who punched me in the alley, or a squidgy, orange, multi-limbed blancmange, but a clown. I made the mistake last night of telling him I am frightened of clowns. I pretend not to notice.

'Phase two?'

'Phase one, is placing the inhabitants of the



world in a trance, phase two means the store's open.'

'Now wait!' My ears deceive me, 'stores?'

'Stores!' Klaa echoes my words.

'Wait,' I say, 'you are telling me that that huge thing at the end of the street is a... shop?'

Klaa nods. His little rubber nose wobbles freakishly. 'Or to be more frank, store-ships.'

'Store-ships? Flying shops? No, wait!'

But despite standing there in long, squeaky shoes, gaudy makeup and a red globular nose, he is being deadly serious.

'Weren't you listening earlier? They fatten you up, and sell your flesh on to the next world.'

I am confused again. 'What's that got to do with shopping?'

'Dim human creature,' Klaa is starting to annoy me now. 'How do you think they go about fattening you all up? They have ships stuffed

with the meat of other aliens, only you don't see it. You see all of your favourite food, greasy chicken, crisps, chocolate, cakes, pizza, chips, sweets, pies or whatever it is that takes your fancy. You take it home and over the next two weeks you put on weight. You keep going and going every day until you are big enough, and then they pounce on you like sharks in a feeding frenzy.'

'Let's count our blessings,' I say with some relief, 'at least it's only one ship.'

Klaa slaps at a screen on the wall, there is an annoying smugness in his features, a familiar circular shape materializes, mother Earth. 'Look!' he says, 'each store-ship on your planet is represented by a small, red dot.'

I am now, suddenly terrified. The world before my eyes is almost entirely red. 'It's all red!'

'There is one store-ship situated every two

miles! No one can escape the mind device.'

My short term memory kicks in, 'I did!'

'Of course you did,' Klaa's smugness swells, like the glow of a slow-reacting light bulb. 'Your whiskey saved you.'

'You mean it was because I was drunk?'

Bobo stares right into my eyes. In all my deepest, darkest nightmares, this was exactly how I've always predicted my death. 'Do you honestly believe that you are the only person on this stupid planet of yours who gets drunk?'

I shrug, 'I s'pose not!'

'They were following me. I couldn't take any chances. So I put something in your bottle to deflect the beam from their ships.'

So this explains it. For a while I'd been wondering if perhaps these Zartangs had been sent to us for a reason, to delete all our folly. There was a tiniest flicker of a spark in the back

of my addled mind, telling me that perhaps for once in my life, I was special and that I'd been singled out to be the last surviving human being on Earth, with the sole purpose of finding a new Eve and starting again from scrap. Who am I kidding?

'What did you put in my bottle?' I have to know.

'Oh,' he says.

'Surely it's something impressive, some chemical; we don't have on our world?'

'Just a little bodily... secretion. In my world we have within us certain chemical substances that can be of help to others. Not us, but others.'

'So you... oozed some liquid into my scotch?'

'Yes!'

Now I feel violated. Like some gullible girl in a night club, who's had her drink spiked while she's nipped off to the lav. 'And this... secretion blocked whatever is affecting everyone else

from fiddling with my brain?’

‘Yes!’

My mind returns to that bizarre morning that turned into an equally bizarre afternoon. Yes, I remember now, the scotch did taste odd. But I didn’t care then. It was how I was feeling. I’d have drunk the contents of the washing up bowl, if it had got me into a reasonably advanced state of mental incompetence. ‘So you saved my life?’

‘I did,’ he exclaims, ‘although I am beginning to wonder under the circumstances, whether if perhaps I should have used a different subject.’

I thank him anyway. A strange whine comes out of the hull of the ship, the main lighting flickers. ‘What was that?’

‘It is worse than I thought,’ he sighs, ‘the energy flow to the blanket is diminishing. I can steady it for now, but you will have to get me more

vegetables.'

'What now?'

He nods. He still has a clown's face. I cannot tell if he is joking or not. 'But watch out for the patrols.'

'Patrols?'

'Drones, they use them to make sure the mesmirbeam is still effective on the customers.'

So that is what it is called, and the unfortunate sods who have to endure it are called customers.'

I get a grip, or at least something close to one.

'Very well, a man's got to do and all that.'

I make my way to the hatch. Klaa presses something and it glides open magically. I turn. One last thought drops into my head like a penny in an old jar. 'Just wondering,' I say, 'and I know I'll probably end up regretting this.'

He obliges me. 'Speak!'

‘This bodily secretion?’

‘Ah!’ he exclaims with a worrying amount of enthusiasm, ‘it is nothing to be afraid of. It will last as long as the Zartangs are here.’

‘Yes,’ I say, ‘but what was it?’

Klaa pauses and emits words that immediately make me want to dive back in the ship and punch him. ‘I believe on your world you call the substance... urine!’

‘What!’ I say utter disbelief, ‘so you pissed in my whiskey?’

‘I did, yes!’

I gather myself, and try not to think about it. As disgusting as the scenario is, it did save my brain from zombification. ‘Alright!’ I say in the end. ‘But make sure you’ve changed into something else by the time I get back. The next time somebody says the word urine to me, I don’t want it to be coming from a clown.’

As I tiptoe up the garden path, I am grabbed by another notion. Of course, there's no need to go to any shop. I can just walk into other people's houses and raid their fridges. Nobody will ever know. They are practically vegetables themselves

My face acquires a satisfactory smile, as I go through my house to the street. Then, as I reach the hallway, there is a noise coming from upstairs, as if something has fallen over in one of the rooms, or there are bad aliens in the house, no, as if something has just fallen over, that's all. I should investigate, but my feet are much wiser than my head. Before I even realise that I should have gone upstairs, my feet have brought me out to the pavement.

Cautiously, I peruse interiors of some of the houses. Their inhabitants are still in the shop buying weird meat, thinking it's a sherry trifle



or something.

My first port of call is Mrs. Bailey. She is an old woman who recites Shakespearean sonnets to cats, on the understanding that they have a single clue what she is banging on about. My line of thinking is, that the only people who eat veg are serious people, who devote a lot of time to not consuming anything remotely interesting, like pasties or crisps. She would have loads of veg I think, because she is a right miserable cow.

I tiptoe through her front door and seek out the living room. She isn't there, but it doesn't stop me from being scared. It is said in certain circles that she radiates a huge physical presence. I am beginning to realise what they mean. The house is her down to a T; very sober looking wallpaper, minimal ornaments, nothing much to please the eye, or stimulate the

imagination thereabouts. Then I stop dead on the plain, crème rug. There is somebody sitting in the armchair and it isn't her. It is a woman in her early thirties, blonde wavy locks tied in a ponytail, pretty, slim but large breasts. Like Mrs. B she is staring at nothing at all. Her hands clutch the knees of her skinny jeans.

'No,' I whisper to myself, 'it can't be. The mesmirbeam thing that Klaa spoke of has somehow had a peculiar effect on your person, and made you young again? 'God woman, you're gorgeous!'

This is the first time I have dedicated one thought to snogging the face off that horrid woman. All by themselves, my lips start travelling across the room towards hers. For a moment they hover over her smooth, perfect ivory cheeks before going in for the kill. My eyes are closed at this time. I am an old

romantic at heart. Then just as I am beginning to feel the firm, soft ridges of her mouth, I feel a sharp slap on my cheek.

My eyes snap open and meet a still very gorgeous, but now very angry expression. 'You sleazy bastard!' she yells 'How dare you!'

'Keep your voice down! The Zartangs!'

'Is this the only way you can kiss a woman, when they're in a catatonic state?'

'I'm sorry!' I say. She gets up. 'I was just trying to see if you were alive.'

'Bollocks!'

'You don't seem to have any mirrors in your house Mrs. Bailey, so I thought I'd see if I could feel your breath on my...'

'Tongue?' she snaps.

'No, I meant, cheek!'

I offer the limpest but sincere sounding apologies. 'Sorry, Mrs. Bailey...'

‘What?’ She is offended slightly. ‘I’m not Mrs. Bailey!’

This comes as a tremendous relief, after all, what in mid song, it all backfired, and she turned back again?

The mysterious beauty is about to leg it out the door, but stops. For one wonderful second, I am thinking she is going to say, I know you’re a pervert, but that doesn’t matter. Let’s find a quiet corner of this planet that these bastards haven’t infested and make babies. But she doesn’t. With an accompanying frown, she says. ‘You seriously thought I was seventy-two year old woman, and you wanted to give me a big wet kiss?’

‘Yes!’ I say, it slipped out without my permission.

She shakes her head and disappears. I follow her, but she is nowhere to be seen.

‘Ah well!’ I say, as I venture into the kitchen, still grinning. ‘Easy come-easy go!’

My approach to Mrs. Bailey’s fridge is pretty similar to an old archaeologist entering an ancient forgotten tomb. My hands hover over the handle nervously, as my mind gathers ghosts of things which lie within. As the door opens, just like the archaeologist, my face becomes a light. But this is just the little bulb that comes on when you open the door. My hope doesn’t last for long. There are just large blue slabs of meat, that previously belonged to some poor creature of another inhabited world, quite possibly with two heads, and eleven penises, or something even weirder if there is such a thing.

There is a foul yet unrecognisable stench coming off the strange meat, a mixture of manure and ten year old cheese. Hastily, I slam

the door and rush back into the living room. I realise that by now, it would be the same as every house in the country on the planet. Then I think about her back garden, the woman is too boring to have a lawn and a barbecue set. I look out of the window. I am right. Unless I am very much mistaken there is a fairly large cabbage patch out there. I grab some carrier bags from the pantry and get to work.

I don't like gardening. It is too much like work, even if you're doing it for yourself for your own survival. So my hands yank the green, leafy orbs from the dirt without even a modicum of satisfaction. At least I won't have to touch another bloody one in my life again after this. Klaa is hatching a plan to save the world, otherwise, why bother coming?

A siren sounds in the streets. Suddenly, we are back in the war. Creaking noises echo in the

wind. It reminds me of squeaky wheels. I glance down at my stash. Three bags will have to do. Something is coming.

Without another thought, I run through Mrs. B's house and stop by the gate. My eyes venture nervously towards the eerie sound that wants to chase me. Hundreds, no thousands of people are drifting mindlessly up the hill. It's like attack of the dead people.

My hands stuffed with bulging carriers, I make my way back to my house. I can't resist taking a peak through the window to see what's happening. I see a thick line, tramping along the pavement. Each one has a trolley in front of them filled to the grill with that stinking, blue meat. Rather creepily, there are no wheels on them even though they squeak. This image will haunt me forever.

All I can think about after that, is getting back

inside that invisible ship, where hopefully we will be safe like babies in a womb, until those awful store aliens bugger off. I stop to recapture the image of the girl and wonder how it was, she was able to escape the beam like me, something to take up with the clown. In my hallway, I listen for noises upstairs. There is nothing. I am relieved. My imagination has obviously been working overtime.

I return to the alien's ship at the bottom of my garden, to find him standing in the hatchway. He has anticipated my return. Some gadget on some panel he hasn't yet told me about. He has done what I asked, but is the orange blob again. 'So it's true,' I say, 'this really is you!'



## 5. the multi-limbed beach ball

There is a huge stain of satisfaction on Klaa's face, if that is what you call it. It seems there are enough cabbages to put into the system. Immediately, he sets to cutting each one into cubes, using some horizontal device made out of red lasers. It puts me in mind of those cheap plastic things you phone up television networks for and give your card details, and the first time you use it, it falls to pieces. I am beginning to understand why his ship is called the Decrepit, for something so futuristic and spacey. It's a real tacky piece of crap. God knows what it's like on the outside. If the truth is known, that's probably the reason he wants to keep it invisible.

Funny, but even the sight of the cabbages isn't making me hungry. I hate cabbages, but I

haven't eaten for four days. I should be salivating. I mention this to Klaa.

'Of course you're not hungry,' he tells me, 'the anti-hunger field generator is preventing you from needing food. These ships are designed to go for long distances, and there isn't the room for that amount of supplies.'

I am both amazed and impressed. 'These ships are designed?'

'Do not laugh at my work,' he sneers.

'Your work?' I am impressed, for real this time.

'That is what I do,' he says, 'I am an engineer. It is my job to make things better, by inventing things to enhance our existence.'

'You eliminated hunger,' my voice almost sings, this is great. 'You must be really popular on your world, doing something like that.'

Klaa falls silent, although it doesn't last long. Under his breath he mutters, 'I wouldn't say

popular.’ His tone is odd. I want to question his words, but don’t bother.

I change the subject. ‘You’ll never guess what happened to me yesterday.’

‘You will have to tell me,’ Klaa replies dryly. ‘My species have not been blessed with the gift of telepathy.’

‘I found another person like me, a survivor.’

‘Survivor?’ Klaa shuffles his somewhat impressive collection of eyeballs into a different order.

‘Yes!’ I pipe, ‘a girl!’

‘A girl?’ Klaa uses his many limbs to collect the small chunks. He curls the ends of his tentacles around them, and drops them into a chute in the hull. The buttons around it, give out a dazzling orange glow. ‘And do you like girls then?’

‘Of course!’ I say, ‘Love girls; love their lumps

and their curves and everything.’

‘I see,’ the tone of his voice shows no sign of escaping monotone. ‘So this... girl, you founder her... attractive?’

I had to answer in the affirmative, my head was already nodding frantically.

‘And was this attractive girl,’ he continues, ‘everything you envisaged to be a perfect specimen of the female of the species?’

‘She was alright,’ I say and then, ‘alright, yes, she was absolutely perfect!’

Klaa can’t nod. He hasn’t got a neck. Somehow I know that if he did have one, it’s exactly what he would be doing at this juncture.

I am suspicious now. ‘Alright, let’s have it!’ My hand accidentally brushes his flesh, it’s rubbery, slimy and cold. Like a beach ball that’s been left in the yard all winter.

As if this was just some casual banter on a

cookery show, Klaa places the last of the cabbages on the unit and presses the button on the screen. 'It's a trap you fool!' he says brazenly. 'No one who hasn't sampled the secretion, can escape the mesmirbeam.'

But she did. 'So what was it then?'

The laser slicer comes down for the last time. The smell hasn't been pleasant. 'Or it was quite possibly, gas!' he says finally.

'Gas?'

'The beam is invisible, but is strong. As it travels through the air, it hits various things, chemicals which create a hallucinogen. It was probably that.'

'Sure!' I say, 'an hallucinogen that can slap you in the face!'

He stares at me again, or rather, into me. 'You are still an idiot!' he says. 'You were supposed to warn your leaders about the Zartangs.'

'I told my sister,' I say, 'it's the next best thing. She tells everybody what I say. It would have reached them eventually.'

I ignore his abusive tone, putting it down to stress. He is, after all, the last of his kind, as I could be soon. The poor bugger doesn't even have anybody to mate with. Not only that, I don't think he has forgiven me yet for trying to kill him.

I think of the blonde girl again, and hope that she is real. If the rest of the human race becomes barbecue meat, she will have to be less particular about who she jumps in the sack with. Sad to think I have to be the last bloke on Earth, in order to net a good looking woman.

We talk for ages. Still, he insists she is a product of my infected mind. I am determined to prove him wrong, to go out and find her and bring her back in order to prove that I haven't

gone mad.

Klaa tells me not to leave the ship for a while, as things are going to get bad outside now, and it is getting dark. I remind him that the rest of my kind is going to end up big blue steaks in a fridge on another planet.

'Purple!' he corrects me, in that annoying way which makes me want to slap him. He wobbles as he walks away from me along the deck plate. A part of me is wondering if he has any feet. There is something he is hiding from me, I know it. Usually you can tell if you look into someone's eyes. It's a little difficult with him, he has a frightening collection and they keep changing places. It's like watching frogspawn in a tumble dryer. I know he isn't being up front with me, I just do. But he is imperative to my survival, my only hope and so I just wait to see what comes out.

I am watching him waddle off and glancing at the hatch. Getting out is easy, you just press your hand against the Perspex or whatever it is. It detects your body heat and opens. I try this, it doesn't work. The little orange shit has been fiddling with it. I am locked in. I chase after him and end up in a large circular room with white, shiny walls. There is high a cushion in the centre. Klaa drops his body onto it and sighs.

'So this is what you call saving a planet?' I am abrupt, there is little point being otherwise.

'I never said I was going to save your world human,' he says calmly. All of his tentacles are splayed out on the floor. There are eight. The thing is some sort of octopus.

'There is something I need from my house,' I lie.

'That is nonsense,' he sneers, 'you want to look for that female.'



‘Why would I?’

‘It is natural for you. There is no hope for your race. You see another of your kind, a female, and see it as your solemn duty to mate with her, and mate with her over and over again, until you have a hundred or a thousand offspring.’

‘Rubbish!’ I exclaim, although the thought had come to me. ‘There is just something I need from my bedroom.’

‘What do you need?’

‘Erm...’ I think about it. ‘It’s boring here. Normally when I’m bored I eat, only you can’t do that here. You have that anti-eating whatever.’

‘Really?’

‘I need something to do, also a change of clothes,’ I get that in quickly before he has a chance to think, ‘you must smell my clothes, they’re bloody rank, right?’

There is a saying about hearing someone thinking, I've heard Steph use it many times. With Klaa you can actually hear his brain sloshing around, as if to process thoughts. 'Very well,' he says, 'you have until half a The Antiques, Bargain Show to return, and then I am coming to get you.'

I make my way back to the hatch and he follows. By the door, I say, 'You don't have to lock me in, you can trust me.'

'Be quick!' he snaps, 'and if you see that female again, under no circumstances must you bring her back to this ship.'

I smile at him, 'Worry not alien friend. If I see her while I'm anywhere near my bed, I'll make sure she doesn't follow me here.' I am of course lying. The lock on the hatch was the final straw. Yes, it is safe in there, but there is no way I am going to be held prisoner by a shifty alien.

I stroll down the gangplank onto the lawn. The hatch whirs closed behind me. I don't know why I'm so happy now, behind me is safety and survival, in front of me is an alien race, who like to slice you into small pieces, and place you in a freezer cabinet in bags with barcodes on. I must be insane.

The sky has become a deep blue-grey. Time seems to be behaving in an odd way now. Perhaps it is that alien blob ship. The air is even colder although it is just getting into June. Everything feels so bleak all of a sudden. I hope Steph is OK. I hoped they hadn't gotten around to eating anybody yet. Klaa has told me it begins quite soon. He refuses to be specific on such matters.

I return to the house and throw some things into a rucksack. Glancing out of my bedroom window, which backs into my garden, I see that

all is peaceful down there. My next thought is to find that girl and move on to somewhere, far beyond the reach of these vicious Zartangs. That is, if there is such a place.

## 6. the shiny black ship

I wake up where I finally fell asleep, in the cellar in the house at the end of the street. It has been unoccupied for two months. The owners are being finicky over the asking price. My thinking is, that the Zartangs would know this, and not go looking for anyone there. All the same, there

is a sturdy shovel by my side. I grabbed it en route. You can never be too careful.

For the first time in days, my stomach feels like food. It is grumbling. Perhaps this is a big mistake. There is no proper food anywhere now, just that weird-looking meat. I wonder if I should chance another trip to Buymors. Never have I felt so keen to go through those automatic doors.

In the street is all quiet. No birds are singing, no dogs barking. 'Do they eat dogs and birds too? I wonder.

Instinctively, I keep close to hedges and fences. As if they could ever possibly hide me from vicious predators. Now there was a thought, predators. So this is what a deer feels like, or an otter.

At exactly 8.30, as it says on the clock through Mrs. Bailey's window, all of the doors in the

street open with military precision, and zombified people step out onto their pathways. They stand there like skittles while I negotiate their bodies along the street. They're starting to look chubby. Klaa was right. The purple meat has calories that are like nothing on Earth. It is almost as if over the past few days, fourteen Christmases have gone by.

I glance at their pathetic faces. Perhaps this is all meant to happen. Humans are stupid. Natural selection has a way of getting rid of the stupid. It sends something smarter after them, to take them out. You can't have a stupid race of creatures running a planet. It comes to me now why it is I am so lazy and unsociable. We humans are suicidal. We stuff things into our bodies, even though we are told they will kill us in the most painful fashion, and while we're doing this, living fast and easy, and wanting

things we don't even need, and being generally crappy with one another, we're bugging up the planet in the most fashionable way. I am thinking, are these idiots really worth saving anyway? Perhaps my first instinct was right. I should do what Klaa was thinking I wanted to do, grab the girl, head into the hills and make babies.

'God, you're getting cynical Adrian Lotterby!' I remark to myself. But maybe that's what these Zartangs did. Perhaps they're not bad people, but beings performing some great interplanetary service, by wiping the slate for something more intelligent. As I pass my house and notice a gap on the road. My lovely new stolen Ferrari is gone.

Any further thoughts of where it could possibly be, are shaken from my head by a sudden familiar sound. I know that sound. It is the

noise in the sky when they first arrived. I look right and left for somewhere to hide my frightened body. It is too late. The morning sky goes dark very quickly. I run into the nearest doorway and hide behind the nearest convenient person. Luckily it is Mr. Yardwood. Before he was turned into a human vegetable, he worked at the local library. I went in there once, didn't like it. He is taller than me and slightly broader.

I look up in time to see one of those black slab store ships pass overhead. I experience a sudden chill, geometric shapes aren't supposed to behave like that. At first, I think it has just arrived, then as it turns to the sky and turns to a square-ish dot. I realise it is leaving. A minute after that, the skittle people move to their gates. They turn in unison to face the same direction. A minute after that, a purple star of light



appears in front of them, which broadens into something dazzling. It bursts and in front of each person is now one of those weird, wheelless trolleys...

Soon, and without no sound cue at all, they start to move.

At the end of the street there is the Zartang ship. Somehow it looks even larger, unless we have all shrunk from the beam. At the shop, the line stops. There is nothing there like a doorway, just as there are no windows. Entering that huge, cold, creepy block would be like entering a mountain. It is hard to believe that it could be hollow at all.

Then just as I am thinking that a bright yellow archway materializes, and the mindless minions are absorbed one by one along with their trolley. My head begins to wobble, like Klaa's round orange arse, and I think I'm going to

faint. My feet want to move away, but they don't. I'm getting closer and closer to the ship. My heart is throbbing now like a bagful of rabbits. The beam has got me. I can feel myself getting pulled in against my will. What horror awaited beyond that sinister arch?

Yet, as I am drawn in, it is not like that at all. Contradictory to its unpleasant exterior, its interior is bright and extremely familiar. I see that this is not some horrible place at all, or at least anything unearthly, but Buymors. All of the aisles appeared the same as they were the day I was ejected from the place, by my so-called brother-in-law/arsehole.

Inside, I am greeted by my ex-boss, Crimp. 'Welcome back!' he beams, and he is talking to me. Despite following dozens of people inside, there is only me now.

'What happened to the others?' I ask.

‘Don’t worry about them lad. You look hungry. Grab a trolley and fill it with low-priced, top quality produce.’

‘What with?’ I turn out my jean pockets.

‘New policy lad!’ His grin is worrying. Yet somehow, I am persuaded into going along with everything he says. ‘Buy now, and you will pay later!’ He waves his arms like a stage magician, and I see the shelves are stacked with everything I like to stuff into my mouth by the pound. Not a single cabbage in sight. I didn’t need to get a basket. A trolley was instantly in front of me.

‘This place has changed,’ I say, now with fairies in my brain.

‘Look!’ Crimp points towards the tills. There is not a soul sitting at any one of them. But he has done what I wanted him to do, get rid of those bloody awful self-service machines.

It doesn't matter which aisle I go down first, everything I see is marvelous. In my head, I'm eating it already. There is no need at all to pick things from the shelves, it all materialises in the trolley as I pass; meat pies, greasy seasoned chicken, barbecue pizza, chocolate pudding, Black Forest gateaux, chips (which you don't even have to cook before you eat), troughs and troughs of sweets, liquorice, strawberry laces, biscuits, posh cheeses, lobster and something I have always wanted to try but never could afford - caviar.

I don't recall getting back to my house, but I am suddenly amidst a treasure trove of edible delights, which I hastily shove down my gullet, washed down with the finest champagne. 'First thing Monday morning,' I say, dropping in the last truffle in the packet, 'I'm going ask for my job back!'

My stomach has already started to swell, that is, even more than it was before. It doesn't matter. If I'd thought of going on a diet before, then it was the furthest thing from my mind now. There is no more any disgrace in being fat. Who the hell was going to care anyway?

I don't try to fathom anything out, my head doesn't want to. What else is there to fathom out? This is Heaven on Earth. 'Buy now, pay later' Crimp had said. Ha ha! I would just keep going back and back again and eat and eat until I burst. Good as this food is, the strangest thing was that the more of it I eat, the more of an appetite I get.

I stop up most of the night, despite the fact that my eyelids have anvils attach to each one, begging me to get into my bed. Sweet, savoury, savoury, sweet, my dedication to eating is paramount.

But just like anything else that is wonderful in the world, it has to somehow come to an end. I don't hear my front door creak open, through the sound of my own enthusiastic chomping. Neither do I hear anyone enter my living room. I don't recognise the voice at all.

'I don't know what your name is, but I want you to listen to me.'

'Hi there!' I beam foolishly at what is merely a blur, then add, 'You can't have any of this, it's all mine!'

'That pizza slice you are about to put in your mouth...'

'Delicious!' I exclaim. 'The best thing I have ever tasted! Thick, juicy, cheesy, succulent pizza.'

'Put it down!'

'No chance!' I don't want to!

'It's not what you think!'

My eyesight is a little fuzzy, but the thing in my

right hand is most definitely a wedge of Buymors finest Pepperoni Bonanza. The pointy end flops toward my bottom lip, and I guide it in with one lash of my watery tongue.

‘It’s the meat from the ship!’ the mystery voice goes off again. ‘It’s not a pizza. It’s that horrible bloody meat!’

I seem to know the voice now. I’ve heard it before and associate its gentle lilt with something pleasant. ‘Do I know you?’

‘No you don’t. But we have met.’

I shovel in the pizza like a bird guzzling a worm, a sumptuous, pepperoni-ridden, spicy, saucy worm, regardless of what is said to me. My eyes struggle to form a human shape.

‘We’ll try something else.’

I don’t really want to listen, but I still do at the same time, weird.

‘Close your eyes!’

'Why?'

'Do it!'

My lids do as instructed and slam shut. 'Done!'

'Now don't say anything else. Just listen and do what I say.'

I nod gently, silently, obediently.

'Good! Now I am going to count to ten and when I have finished, you will be in a quiet place in the middle of a desert. One-two-three-four-five-six-seven-eight-nine-ten! Open your eyes!'

I do that.

'Are you there?'

'Yes.'

'Describe it to me.'

'It's like one of those ones you see in cowboy films. It has green cacti, wriggly snakes, lumpy sand everywhere and...'

'And?'



‘An eagle!’

‘Good! Now think about that place and how quiet and peaceful it is.’

‘It’s talking to me!’

‘The eagle, what is it saying?’

‘It just said, “the eagle, what is it saying?”’

‘That was me you idiot! Now, I am going to count backwards. When I get to one and click my fingers you will be back in your living room. You will be wide awake this time, and you will see exactly what is real, OK?’

‘OK!’ The eagle is real. It flies towards me and lands on my shoulders. It begins pecking at my head. There is a worrying hole coming any second. ‘Ow!’

‘Ten-nine-eight-seven-six-five-four-three-two-one!’

My eyes snap open. In front of me is the best thing I’ve seen all day. It is that woman I saw in

Mrs. B's house. 'You!'

'Yes me!' she says. 'Now how do you feel?'

I am aware of this disgusting taste in my mouth, like I'd been eating horse manure, laced with stinking ten- year old cheese. I look around the room. That vile, purple-blue meat is everywhere, all over the floor, the table in the centre of the room, the carpet and most disturbingly there are traces of it all down my chest. The truth rapidly sets in, and I feel ill, disgusted and ashamed. I am violently sick.

'Sorry about having to get in your head,' she says, 'it was the only way.'

'Where did you learn to do that?' I ask between wretches.

'Long story! I was an assistant to this hypnotist. Nothing glam, pubs, working men's clubs, that sort of thing. Mindwarp he was called, bleeding stupid name, but it was a laugh.'

'Yet I feel curiously grateful to him for some reason!'

She dips into the kitchen and returns with a tea towel. She hands it to me with a plastic bucket.

'Er.. Carla!' She says, 'Carla Jones!'

## 7. the food awakening

I am something resembling happy. Carla stopped the night. Not in the same room. I had the sofa. The foul stench coming out of the bucket on my lap, is enough to repel a creature that doesn't even have the sense of smell, or even a nose, or a head. I have been vomiting all night. I am very grateful for her staying, and keeping an eye on me.

The front door is pushed open. She has been out while I slept. When she enters the room she's holding a bacon sandwich. 'No thanks!' I say instantly. I will never trust another item of food as long as I live.

'It's OK,' she assures me, 'it's perfectly real!' God knows where she got that from. Did she say she was a magician's apprentice or something of the sort? I take it from her and bite into it. She is as

good as her word. It tastes divine. I decide not to mention Klaa yet, I'm not sure I want to.

She opens the windows. A cold breeze invades the room. It's freezing now, but favourable to the smell, it was allowed in to get rid of.

'We'd better leave,' I say, 'this place isn't a good place to be at present.'

'No!' she replies sharply, 'this is probably the safest place to be at the moment. 'They've already checked this house out. The patrol droids were here a couple of days ago and found nothing. They won't be back now for a while.'

So that was the sound I heard upstairs. Just as well I was too cowardly and lazy to investigate.

'So how did you escape that mind beam thing?' I have to ask her now.

'For some reason it didn't affect me.' She replies, 'I was practicing for a show, mental

training exercises. I've just started going solo. I'm better off really. The man was a complete id...' She stops dead and eyes me suspiciously. I recognise that look. I get it off Steph quite often.'

'What? You're freaking me out.

'Yes, that's a point!'

'What?'

'How did *you* manage to escape the beam?'

I gulp. Now, more than any other time in my life, I need to be more creative with the words that come out of my mouth. I attempt to shuffle things around, in the hope that something reasonably credible emerges all on its own. 'Drunk!' is all my imagination could come up with.

'Drunk?' Carla isn't all that impressed.

'Yes, drunk.'

'But surely a lot of other people were, when

they came. Normally you can't walk home on a Saturday, without tripping over some staggering body with a kebab in its hand.

'Yes,' I say, 'but I was really, really drunk, having been just sacked from my job - which I really loved by the way, loved that job. I love to work, Carla, I am a natural provider.'

'Oh!' she does something funny with her eyes.

I change the subject, it is worth a try. 'So you're from around here?'

'Yes!'

'I haven't seen you about.'

'When I say I'm from around here, what I really mean is I was born here. My parents moved to Liverpool when I was small. My dad got a job on the docks.'

It is odd, but I do not detect any tinge of any accent. In fact, she sounds quite posh.

I ask her how she has been managing. She tells

me, she's managed to lie low with some success. It is because she has been out regularly with the Territorial Army on weekends, now cancelled due to the unexpected alien domination. What an interesting human being this woman, I am thinking. A professional stage hypnotist and a part-time soldier, and I've learned all of this in the space of half an hour.

My thoughts return to the bottom of my garden and Klaa. Perhaps I should tell her about him now. I wonder why it is I am not to bring her back to the ship. 'So what are we going to do now?' I ask her.

'We aren't going to do anything,' she insists. 'You are staying here, and keeping your head down. I am going to see if I can find anything out about these ships.'

'But I want to come with you,' I say first and then realise what the words actually were.



'I can't take the risk,' she shakes her head abruptly, 'remembering what happened to you yesterday. I've got skills, mental discipline skills which will lock my mind out of the beam. It is probably for the best. She hasn't mentioned what it is we would be doing, but it sounds a lot like hard work to me. Then just when I think she is finished, she asks me about what I saw on the ship.

'It wasn't a ship,' I begin and my brain attempts to get a grip. All I can think of is that – at the time -it was absolutely wonderful. 'Have you ever been in a Buymors store?'

She nods. The look on her face says she is wondering what garbage is going to fall out of my mouth when next I open it.

'It's like every single one of those. The layout is the same. The décor is the same, except there is no staff, apart from Mr. Crimp, or anybody else,

just you and the food.'

'What about the others who went in there with you, where did they go?'

I struggle to think. 'Being there, somehow took me away from other human beings. Like I was cut and pasted into a scene of my own, where nothing else mattered, just me and everything I have ever craved for.'

Carla moves to the door. There she stops. Her eyes are doing that weird thing again. 'Hang on! Something has caught her attention unawares. My eyes follow hers, all the way to the window. There are five, no six people gawping in at us.

'What the..?' I shudder.

'Damn!' Carla circles the room, as if to stumble over a solution. 'It's happening!'

'What's happening?'

'Day of the living dead, only with shops!'

'You mean shopping zombies?'

Carla nods exaggeratedly.

‘Why are they doing that? It’s freaky!’

‘It means our friends have found us. You should never have boarded the ship.’

I have to concur, although I don’t recall having much say in the matter. Again, I consider taking her down the garden to Klaa, better not.

She grabs my arm and yanks me to my feet.

‘Hurry!’

We run into the kitchen to find the back door obscured by these horrible, disturbing bodies.

The same can be said of the window.

‘What are they doing?’ I ask her, as if she would know.

‘They know about you, and are using the mind beam to get your neighbours to bring you to them. The Zartangs don’t do anything they can’t get lesser beings to do.’

‘How do you know all of this?’ I have to ask.

There isn't time for her to explain. We turn around, run through the living room, into the hall and up the stairs. On the landing, we stop.

'Does this house have a roof?' Carla asks me.

'Yes,' I reply sharply, 'I find it stops my carpets getting soaked whenever it rains.'

'I mean can you get to it?'

'I'll be honest, and say I've never actually needed to.'

'You need to now!' We race to the landing. Carla looks up where the hatch to the attic is. She leaps to try to grab the strap which pulls the aluminium ladder, only she isn't quite tall enough. She stares at me like she expects me to do something and then when I don't, slaps me on the shoulder. It stings, even through my tee-shirt.

I pull the ladder down right to the floor and before I can say *ladies first* she is at the top of it.

I follow her up, to find her fiddling with the attic window.

‘You might have a few problems with that,’ I say, ‘It’s stuck because I never have it open.’

‘Thanks!’ Carla looks about the room, not that it is a room. It’s just a place to throw junk when downstairs is full. She picks something up, a long piece of wood that in its former life was a rafter. She launches it against the glass. Her expertise in destroying another person’s property, is second to none. There is nothing much left around the frame.

‘You first!’ she beckons.

‘Why me?’ I quiz.

‘Because if you can fit through there it means I can. You’re a little...’

‘Little what?’

‘Pudgy!’ she quips. ‘If you can get through, it means we don’t have to find another way out.’

The next time I look, she has arranged some of my old crap into a neat little mountain on the floor, after which, she wastes no time at all in nudging me up it like a squirrel rolling a nut. Soon my whole upper torso is poking through the window frame and I get an almost aerial view of my back garden. Now the damage to the environment caused by Klaa's ship is entirely visible.

With Carla's help, grabbing my bottom and shoving, which to be honest is actually quite pleasant; I ascend on to the cold, grey tiles. Heights not being my thing, I instinctively put myself on my back, where cirrus clouds are a more favourable sight compared with the ground.

Carla follows me out fearless and fast.

'So what do we do now?' I ask her, 'wait it out?'

She shakes her head. 'That wouldn't do any

good.' She indicates why, however, as it is in entirely the wrong direction i.e. down. I don't oblige her. 'They're starting to climb!' she shrieks.

'Bugger!' I exclaim. Luckily my house is a semi-detached. We make our way onto the ridge, where crouched almost commando style, we scuttle along to the next house. To my utter disappointment, that end of the building is no nearer the ground than my half.

The rickety old drain pipe doesn't appear in my books, to be capable of withstanding the weight of either us, yet she cries out, 'Slide down there!' followed by 'You first!'

'Don't tell me,' I say, remembering a moment ago, 'you want to see if it will hold me and then you?'

'Something like that!' I am terrified, not so much of heights, but more falling violently to

my imminent death.

'Ladies first!' I chance gingerly.

'It's the twenty-first century,' she reminds me, 'don't patronise me!'

I glance to where we started to see heads and hands clambering onto the tiles. 'How the shitting hell are they getting up here without a ladder?' I wheeze.

'It's the beam,' replies Carla. 'It makes them forget it's a physical impossibility.'

Suddenly, there are more of them. 'Instead of going down that stupid pipe,' I suggest hopefully, 'why don't we just push some of them off?'

'That's murder!' Carla reminds me.

I say, 'Who's going to know?'

Now, they are too close for comfort, resembling animals, rather than remote-controlled people crawling predatorily, seething, moaning and



wheezing towards us like a thick, dark fog. Their foot treads are no more supernatural than ours. Cascading tiles are sent crashing towards the ground.

Now, I feel the urge to respond to the instructions Carla is screaming in my ear hole. I am shaking as I get myself into position. My foot slips, and I grab for the pipe in a panic. I miss. Hurling downwards, I yell for my mother. Miraculously, about halfway down my jeans catch one of the clips. My leg is snagged, my body jolts, and I am thrown upside down. There is a tearing sound, and I hit my head on the yard. My bottom is cold, my jeans are inside out and halfway up my house.

Carla is shouting again. I know this is an intense situation, but I'm getting to realise she is a very shouty person.

'Quick!' She is yelling. It sounds like they have

caught up with her. There is scuffling of some sort. I look up in time to see something come towards me. It is Mr. Harwood, all six-foot seven of him. He narrowly misses me. The sight of his skull smashing against the yard, and the various portions of his brain spraying the concrete, me makes me wince.

'I can't move!' I cry as the sludgy matter drips from my cheek.

'I'm coming down!' Carla is defiant and desperate.

'OK,' I yell, 'but don't look at my arse on the way down!' Before I can say anything else, there is a clanking and a thud. Suddenly she is standing by me.

But our troubles do not end there. More zombie shoppers have appeared out of nowhere. They are climbing next door's hedge and coming around the side of the house.

I tug like mad at my trousers, to get myself free. Carla tries too. They are close now, I can smell them. This is what the beam does. It makes them forget to wash. It turns you into careless, mindless filthy stiffs. I smell exactly the same.

It is hopeless. 'You'll have to take them off,' she says, pushing an old woman out of the way. It is Mrs. Bailey. She falls backwards, taking another woman and a teenage boy with her. They writhe about on my lawn hopelessly, flailing their limbs like pet tortoises which have been turned upside-down. I manage to tear myself loose and scramble to my feet, with my jeans around my ankles.

Suddenly, there are hundreds of them. It's as if every person in the town has been sent to get us. They are everywhere, all around us. There is nowhere to go. Carla gets close to me. We are back to back. She picks some things up from the

yard; a garden hoe and a broom. I have never used either of these items in my life. Carla hands me the hoe and we immediately begin striking out at the seemingly undead. My heart is beating so fast, that it's almost one, merged pulse. Carla is grunting and groaning as she lunges at these beasts, even in this horrible intense situation, I am getting turned on.

I try copying her. Lashing out I manage to catch someone, some sad looking pensioner. He has a pretty severe cut on his cheek. I feel sorry and then recognise his chalk-white, unearthly face. It is Mr. Wilberforce, my old geography teacher. I think of all the endless detention, lines, rainfall statistics, GNPs, population figures, lay lines, tectonic platelets, and suddenly it all falls effortlessly away from me.

I strike again and he spins around, catching a teenage girl on the cheek. She makes no effort

to fight back. As I am observing this, a pair of hands grab me by the throat. They are strong hands, for a catatonic person. I am choking. I try to kick out, but I am restricted by my trousers. The best I can do, is offer a slow knee to the groin. He doesn't feel it. I struggle to breathe. I can't even cry for help. But they have got Carla too. The world around my eyes goes dark, as I feel the air begin to fizzle. I am going to black out, I know it.

Then just as I am convinced that it is time to say goodbye to the world, and my pathetic life, there is a curious sound. It is something like an old air raid siren. Suddenly, they all disperse and there is an old familiar face. It's the old ratbag, beach ball Klaa.

'Thanks!' my words are nothing but a cough for a while.

Carla is coughing too. 'You!' she says to Klaa.

'You!' Klaat says back. There is something they are not telling me.

## 8. the big plan

Carla stares at Klaa, and Klaa at Carla. This rift between them remains a mystery. When she looks at me, all I can think about is, if we are ever going to sleep together. Now that she has seen my bum I feel we share a special bond. We have broken through a barrier. I wonder will she ever reciprocate.

We are all cosy inside the Decrepit, although it seems larger now somehow. I look at Klaa in his true form, and find some comfort. Comedy aliens have got to be better than whatever is out there.

We are all standing in a room called the observation lounge. It has a domed ceiling and white walls. There is a console in the centre, projecting holographic images; people,

buildings, those awful tomb-like spaceships. Klaa's legs lengthen, so that he can reach the controls, as if they are operated by hydraulics. It is fairly humorous.

'It looks like they have boosted the signal,' he informs us. 'You are going to have to consume another secretion.'

'No bloody way!' I assure him strongly. 'No more alien pee.'

'Alien pee?' Carla almost laughs.

'Don't ask!' I say, 'Let's just say if this guy offers you a cocktail, decline.'

'But it saved your life?'

'That's not the point...'

'Yes, it is. What's worse, drinking alien wee or getting hacked up into pieces and being eaten?'

She is right, of course, but there is still a thing called dignity. I am British after all and we have our pride.



Carla addresses Klaa. 'You're an alien,' she reminds him, 'how do we stop these things?'

'It would be incredibly difficult,' he whines, 'there are too many of them.'

Carla is insistent, I like that in a woman, 'But they have to have a weak point right, an Achilles heel? Something we can exploit?'

'There might be something.'

'I'm all ears,' says Carla.

'The beam is transmitted from one ship. The others have receivers, which connect each one all over the planet. If we can get someone inside that one, there is a possibility we can kill the transmission and release everyone from it.'

'That's it then,' Carla is more enthusiastic now.

'We find it and take out the transmitter. So, which one?'

'I have absolutely no idea whatsoever,' says Klaa.

'Some alien you are.' I intervene, 'I mean you

waltz down here in your invisible spaceship, with your special powers, like Captain Octopus, tell us we all need saving and then say we're all bugged.'

'There are millions and millions of ships,' replies Klaa nervously, it could be any one of them.'

'I know,' I pipe up, 'is there one that is perhaps a bit bigger than all of the others, possibly with a bloody great aerial sticking up out of the roof.'

'Shut up Adrian!' Carla and Klaa say this at exactly the same time.

'You need to absorb a secretion soon,' Klaa reminds me again, 'or the Zartangs will find us and we won't be any position to stop them.' He waves a tentacle over one of the lights on the wall. Instantly something like a test tube appears. It contains a clear liquid and an ominous, swirling blue spiral.

'Is that it?' I inquire.

'Yes!' says Klaa.

'And I need to swallow it? I can't have it injected?'

Klaa shuffles his eye collection around again. I realise now, that this is some sort of anxiety issue. 'I have conducted tests. If placed directly into the human bloodstream, it mutates for some reason and is no use.'

I pass. 'So, about this ship!'

'There might be a way,' says Klaa.

'Brilliant!' says Carla.

'If we can get somebody on one of the ships, there may be a way to trace the leader craft.'

I don't like the sound of this. Usually, when there is something that is needed to be done, and it's not very nice, I'm directly involved. Mr. Polenorth has done this across me many times, during my four days working for Buymors. The

thinking behind it is simple, if you get Adrian Lottery to do it instead of you, and it all goes tits up, give Adrian Lottery all the flack and move on. I know that it will be me who has to enter the ship again.

Both faces are pointed in my direction. Simultaneously, they explode into wide smiles.

‘No!’ I am insistent, ‘not me!’

‘You have already been inside one of these things,’ Carla says, ‘you know what they are like.’

‘Can I remind you that the last time I was on one of their ships, I was brainwashed into eating stinking raw meat?’

‘Not this time,’ says Carla, ‘this time will be different. I’ll hypnotize you so you are still aware of what is going on.’

‘But you’ll still have to drink the wee!’ says Klaa. There is no part of this that has got me sold. No

wiggly worm on the end of a fishing line, to fool me into thinking that this would be a brilliant plan. Then Carla speaks again. There is a silky quality to her voice now. This is a weapon women have in their arsenals, to get what they want. 'Do it for me,' she says huskily, and she strokes my hand. 'I have seen your bottom and it is beautiful. I want to know what the rest of you looks like, underneath those horrible, restrictive clothes.'

Alright, the words she actually uses are, *do it for me*, and the rest is a fabrication of my own imagination.

'Do it for me,' she says again. 'Be strong. Be my hero Adrian.'

'Wait!' I have to ask her something. 'That was all you then, *be my hero?*' I didn't just imagine that?' She nods and smiles, in a way an angel can. 'Please!'

'I'm still not sure. A lot could go wrong,' I say.

'What can go wrong?' asks Carla.

'I could. I'm a complete and utter coward. They would only have to show me a photograph of something sharp, and I'll tell them everything. They'll come and get you too.'

'Not if I hypnotize you. If you let me program you, you will be fine.'

I think about it, but I have made the simple, yet fatal mistake of looking into Carla's eyes again. They are soft, gentle and glazed with beautiful, childlike desperation.

'Alright!' I announce boldly, 'I'll do it!' Then all that softness falls away, like a mask of an actress walking offstage to immerse herself in gin, and she is back to her old self.

'Good!' says Klaa, 'Now take the piss!'

It is an hour or so later, my watch tells me silently and mockingly. I am sitting on a seat in

another room, one I had not ventured in before. The padding makes me feel comfortable and very relaxed, as if it is all part of the plan to stop me changing my mind. It's hard to be argumentative if your bottom is happy.

Carla hovers over me, waving her hands over my face, as if she is going to pull a dove out of my mouth, or the flags of all nations from my nose. I am instructed to close my eyes while she fills my head with pictures.

## 9. the mission

It is morning. I'm standing by my front door in my overcoat, with the collar up. It's June and I've got my heavy duty clothes on. This is so that no one will recognise me, hopefully. At 8.30 exactly, like things coming out of the doors of a shelf full of Austrian cuckoo clocks, the neighbours emerge from their domiciles. Not that I don't regret witnessing Mr. Harwood falling to his imminent death, but Klaa tells me that the numbers have now been registered, and there is a gap for me to fill. This should work to my advantage.

I stand there shaking slightly, as in regimental fashion, they step out onto the pavement. Carla jabs me in the shoulder blade and chirps loudly, 'Now!'



Trying not to think about what is about to happen, I join them, slotting in between two random bodies. Without any warning whatsoever they turn to face down the street. Carla, has told me to try not to show any fear, or it will give me away to the enemy.

Just like before, a little star of light appears. This time I have one of my own. The star grows, and suddenly there is one of those strange shopping trolleys in front of me ready to fill. This is a good sign. It means that I have successfully filled Mr. Harwood's size elevens.

There is the sound again beckoning us. Slowly, we tread towards it to our doom. Carla is annoyingly correct, this time it is different, as nothing takes over me. Her mind trick appears to be working, and as my useless carcass finally crosses the threshold, the point of no return, I am aware of the fact that it isn't the wondrous

place of before, but a dark, forbidden place.

I pretend not to see any of it, merely what they want me to see. Although the very thought of being there makes me feel sick, I gasp like all the others in amazement. The others, have a completely different perspective of the ship interior to me. I see an enormous black room, with sparse lighting and a ceiling that goes on forever and blood up the walls and on the floor. That bloody awful meat is everywhere, it is suspended from the ceiling, by barbarous metal hooks. As each person passes by them with their trolley they are lowered. There is this scathing metallic screeching in the background. This must be the Zartangs version of music.

'Yum yum! Lovely cakes!' I exclaim badly, as my trolley goes into place. I then copy what my witless colleagues are doing, namely yanking the disgusting, stinking blue slabs into my

basket, whilst smiling like a complete buffoon.

My instructions are clear, to seek out the communications array, which is situated somewhere on one of the upper decks. Only, to reach the upper decks I need to locate the elevator to the command decks. There are no signs of these Zartangs, and I cannot decide whether that is a good or bad thing, if this place is anything to go by, a very bad thing. It is also extremely cold, probably because the meat is exposed. I want to pop home and get gloves, but I know that if I do, or even do as much as fasten a shirt button then it is pretty much game over.

My nipples protrude, like a pair of frozen otters. I'm doing fine, until I take my eye off the ball. Following my self-propelling wheelie basket, I scan the walls for anything resembling a doorway. Each time I approach some meat, my trolley stops, so that I can rip a smelly joint

from its hook and drop it in. It won't move again until I do. It wants me to get meat.

My instructions are, to keep doing that and eventually I will be near a wall. This is because the trolleys go up and down every aisle in a store.

The smile never fades, it never leaves my lips, although it is desperate to turn into a silent scream. The muscles around my mouth start to ache. This feels really odd. A part of me is half-expecting the lights to come on any minute, to reveal a camera crew and Bob Keeley, the presenter of *People Are Stupid Idiots*, to shove his microphone in my face and ask me if I feel like a stupid twat. But this is not going to happen. There aren't going to be any embarrassment or laughter. This nightmare is real.

In the corner of my eye I see something, a large square crevice in the wall. This is it. I attempt a

discreet run for it. But as soon as I break ranks, there is a creepy noise, like a clanking metal and my body is hit by a white beam of light. My heart is beating a hole through my chest now, as I expect something terrible to come through an entrance, Zartang security or some sort of robotic arm to pick me up, slice me up and place me in the bargain bucket. But there is just the beam, and it pulls me back into place like a skittle. I try something else. As soon as the beam switches off again, I make another run to the elevator. The same happens, like some light shepherd if pulls me back to my trolley.

That's it, I think; the trolley is connected to me. If my body isn't close, then it activates the beam. So instead of running, I grab hold of the handle and pull it backwards. The thing doesn't shift. I keep trying regardless. However, when it moves off again and I try it, the trolley shows

signs of being a little more manoeuvrable. Obviously, there is some sort of locking mechanism that turns on, when I reach certain points. So I put in another slab of that garbage, trying not to wretch. As soon as it starts off again, I grab the handle and run for it.

It is such a relief that the beam hasn't come on, it really stings. My hand fumbles for buttons, then my head reminds me that on Klaa's ship, the buttons aren't the kind you can feel. They are little coloured shapes, like the games you download to your mobile phone. There is glass. I put my palm against it. Nothing happens. I give it a smack, nothing. Then something hits me. I try it with one hand on the handle of the trolley, and the wall splits in two to create another room. I was right. This is the lift, or at least one of them. From now on, I must stay out of sight, stay in the shadows, or risk becoming

tomorrow's special offer.

Inside the lift I drop to a crouch. The doors are taking too long to close behind me. I can see someone coming towards me, with the most inane grin on her face. When she reaches the end of the aisle, she stops, lifts a piece of the meat up, and before placing it delicately in her trolley, holds it lovingly against her lips and kisses it. It's like the beginning of the weirdest porn film imaginable.

I am even more freaked out now. She looks right in my direction. I swear she's seen me. Then the lift door finally closes, and I'm sent in an upwardly direction, as is characteristic of these devices. It is difficult to tell how many floors I'm passing. There are no lights on the wall, no numbers. But I arrive at whatever floor it was I'd inadvertently selected, dreading at what I will see, when those huge doors open

again. They do, and to my relief it is an empty corridor. I crawl to the opening and poke my head out. Casting my glance left and right, I am relieved to see that the coast is clear.

I walk out into the corridor and my trolley follows me. As I stand up, it gets back into position in front of me. This is going to be annoying, I am thinking, James Bond never had to put up with this on manoeuvres in the films.

My ears detect movement from somewhere along the corridor, eerie clumping and dragging noises. There are a number of rooms with circular windows. With some morbid fascination, I glance through them all, one-by-one in passing. In each room there is a light on, although quite dim. There are lamps on the ceiling like I have never seen, although for some reason, they make me think about operating theatres.



I reach a room, which appears to be for the purposes of relaxation. It has comfortable, although quite high, seating. These Zartangs might be frighteningly tall. Beyond the luxurious seating, there is another door. It has large, green splats all over it. Suddenly, I see these creatures as fun loving, albeit murderous beings. Then, without any warning the door slides open, and something tall, dark, shadowy and slimy, pushes another, smaller creature in. It starts to scream, I'm sure that's what the sound is, and before any other thought, a dazzling white laser is put through its body at the middle. The top half slides off the bottom with a loud squelch. On its way to the floor I catch its face, its distressed little face. I don't want to. The bloody thing's been murdered. It has orange skin and numerous eyes, arranged in no particular order. It is one of Klaa's kind. I

look again and there are more green splats now. Moving swiftly on, I look out for one particular door. Klaa has told me the colour of it, although it doesn't comprehend. He says I will know it when I see it. I turn the corner and there it is at the end of the next corridor. It is a colour I cannot describe, because I have never seen it before in my life. This is one which doesn't exist in our spectrum. .

After approaching the door, as slowly as is humanly possible, I glance through the circular window, scanning the room beyond. It seems peaceful, more of those high seats, but not a slimy, dark bottom of any of the ones in view. All around the room are the same touch screen displays that are on the Decrepit. Zartang access points use DNA recognition. Fortunately, Klaa was able to give me some. I pull a bottle no bigger than one for nail polish out of my pocket

and a small brush. I then paint the access point with the DNA, and the door slides open. I hope to god that nothing horrible is in there, waiting for me.

I am now in the communications room, and time is of the essence. I run swiftly to the console straight away. It is in the centre of the room and has a screen over the top of it. Not saying it's big, but I would love that in my living room for the Saturday night football.

I slip the paper from my pocket. Everything I need to do is on there, the instructions for finding the leading ship through the network. Klaa has given me the code to log into the system, nothing can go wrong. I am beginning to feel like a hero. I, Adrian Lotterby, am going to be the one person to save the planet, sod Superman.

My body swells, a cocktail of nerves and

excitement. It's the adrenaline, that is experienced by things that are being chased.

There are symbols on the paper, a series of five shapes, which must be entered in exactly the right order. How Klaa managed to get hold of them, is anybody's guess. If you don't get it right first time, there is no warning message saying oops, you've made a mistake. The whole ship is alerted via an alarm, which Klaa says is like one of those ancient modems that do the really screechy dial up thing. It doesn't prove to be as easy as I thought it would be, the first digit is fine, as is the second and the third, but the last two look the annoyingly the same.

Think man, think, my head grinds in the message. I scrutinize them both, as if my life depends on it. Oh yes, of course it does depend on it. But they are both S shapes, with what looks like an upside down arrow going through

them. Yet one is different somehow. Five different symbols, Klaa had said to me. Then it hits me. The last one isn't an S but a 5. Maybe it's like passwords. Each time you have to change them, you change the number on the end to the next one up. So, with a smile on my face and my mind on the exit, I think about entering it in.

My heart stops while I wait for whatever the Zartangs have for a home screen appears on the screen. But it doesn't. To my utter horror, there is that dreadful dial up noise echoing all through the ship. I think about that horrible thing with the laser slicer in the other corridor, and a hundred thousand more that are going to head my way at any minute.

Klaa has told me where the exit point is.

'Look for something that resembles a tanning booth in the back. It's really an escape pod. As

soon as it detects your body inside it. It will fire you out of the ship.'

However, there is one snag. The Zartangs are coming, and I can see nothing that looks like a shower or an escape pod. So instinctively, and shaking at the thought of what might happen next, I throw myself on the deck. Once there, I can't help but notice how well my body would fit under the centre console, so I make it happen. My lips are now against the deck. It is cold, and tastes disgusting, but making yuk noises would spell my doom.

I turn onto my cheek instead, in time to see three sets of legs coming in my direction. I'm thinking Zartangs have six legs like giant ants, very interesting, and then they split off in three different directions.

There follows nothing insect-like, but a series of low resonant hums, long ones and short ones

like Morse code. But this is nothing of the sort. This is the way they communicate with one another. Still, it sounds no less threatening than a blood-curdling attack scream. As they search the room, I am hoping that they don't hear the bead of sweat, trickling down my nose or smell my fear. Although, if fear was a fart, I'd have been done for.

Zartang legs, resemble scaly dark green rubber, their feet more claw than flesh. Their blood red talons, tap and scratch as they move around the deck. It grates on me, like nails on blackboard. Worse, I remember that the piece of paper with the instructions on, is on the console. Right now I am wishing I was somewhere less frightening, like a room full of venomous vipers and scorpions.

There is a sudden burst of excitement, really fast resonant hums, which the others echo.

They have found me, this is the end. My eyes are watering, as the feet converge and get closer to my face. Then, just as I'm convinced it's time for me to start screaming at the top of my voice, they do the one thing I wasn't expecting them to do. Not do a song and dance, and throw sweets around the room... alright, the second last thing, they left, closing the doors behind them. I am saved.

So what was it that they were excited about? I'm now wondering. When I emerge from under the console I see that the trolley has gone.

'So that's it,' I whisper, 'the Zartangs have trouble with wandering trolleys as well!'

What I have been blessed with, is a second chance. This time, I'm determined to get the last two digits the right way around. The screen has gone into sleep mode. Fortunately for me, they didn't see my rubbish attempt at trying to



access the ship's main computer. But the paper is nowhere to be seen. I check all of the units, and then the deck, crawling on my hands and knees now, like a possessed spider. Then I see it by the door. I pick the sheet up desperately and with trembling fingers, open it up, but it is ripped, mangled and stained with that green blood. Zartang feet have done this. I only have the last two digits to key in. It's hopeless. My stressed out brain can't remember what the figures looked like. I glance at the screen again. There are at least twenty possibilities. The only thing going in my favour, is that the alien wee seems to keep me invisible to their sensors.

Bugger it, I am thinking, in for a penny. I jab randomly at the two closest shapes to the ones in my head, and this time something happens. Not what I wanted, but something. The screen starts flashing. It is accompanied by a disturbing

noise. I haven't heard this one yet. It is far less scathing than the others, a soft whistle. It should be showing me a file structure by now, I remember that much, only it doesn't. Instead, the wall in front of me opens up to reveal another room. It has a horrible feel about it. There are those nasty, sticky green splatters on the floor, and on the walls. I see what looks like a drainage ditch under a metallic table. There is the most disturbing scream, and after it falls silent, there is a gush of green like a river. It's that slaughter house again. I turn and behind me there is another room in view. To my delight it resembles a shower room, the pods are all along the walls.

I climb into the one that is nearest to me and the door closes automatically. Through the glass, I see dark shadows entering the room. The Zartangs have heard the kerfuffle. I close

my eyes and wish myself somewhere else, like Dorothy in her sparkly, red trainers. For some stupid reason, I open them again. There is a really ugly face against the door of the pod, a reptilian face with the four blood-red eyes and a thousand teeth. I scream and vomit at the same time. There is nasty, pukey mess dripping onto my face. And then there is a whizzing and a sucking sound, and like Klaa said, I am shot out into the open air.

10. seven billion minus two

‘One simple task,’ says Klaa, ‘go to the ship and follow the instructions.’

‘I’m a British man,’ I say in my defence, ‘I don’t do written instructions.’ He is annoying me, the ungrateful little swine. I am almost tempted now, to tell him that I saw some of his friends, trying to duck a bacon slicer just an hour

earlier. I am better than that 'I tried!' That's all I can say.

At least Carla is a little more sympathetic. 'Yes, he tried,' she echoes my words, and just as I begin to feel better about my failings, I hear her telling Klaa that he shouldn't expect much, because I'm a bit of an idiot.'

Regardless, I try to remain hopeful. 'There must be something we can do!'

'Like what?' says Carla.

'You could hypnotize others. You did it for me.'

'Hypnotize?' Carla's tone is mocking me, 'you mean go out and hypnotize everybody in the world, all seven billion?'

'It was just a thought.'

'Technically,' adds Klaa, 'it is not seven billion. It is six billion, nine hundred ninety-nine million nine hundred ninety-nine thousand nine hundred ninety-eight, but this is neither here

nor there.’ And then he adds, ‘That was a joke by the way.’

‘Anyway,’ she continues, ‘even if it were possible, I wouldn’t be able to hypnotize anybody, who has already put under by the mesmirbeam.’

Then, without warning me, I have the absolute king of ideas. I hit the others with it.

‘We might not be able to un-hypnotize the whole world,’ I beam with sudden happiness, ‘but we can at least wake the town.’

‘How?’ says Carla, Klaa isn’t expecting miracles either.

‘The town hall. There was an award ceremony there just before the Zartangs arrived.’

‘And?’ Carla shrugs.

‘There are amplifiers and speakers, still rigged up on the balcony. They had a choir.’

‘And?’ this time it is Klaa. He adds the word,

'human' just to show me he isn't a happy bunny. 'Well, don't you see?' obviously they don't. 'We can get to the balcony, and you can do it through the public address system. You can even do a few gags, and finish with a song if you want!'

'Idiot!' Carla exclaims, Klaa is thinking it, I just know he's thinking it.

'We can try it at least!'

It's night, and we are all snug in what Klaa calls the slumbering room. There is a massive round duvet on a padded floor, made of an unrecognisable material. It is really warm to the touch and comfortable.

'I want chocolate!' says Carla, and she repeats this sentence many times in the space of half an hour.

'You can't be hungry!' I tell her, 'there is this device that stops you from being hungry,

embedded in the ship.’

‘Yes, but I’m a woman!’ she reminds me, as if I needed that. ‘I’m a woman, and I want chocolate. Pop over to Buymors, and get me one of those massive bars of fruit and nut, and I might think about forgiving you.’

There follows the most peculiar dream. I am at a theme park, where all of the rides are made out of food. I am sitting atop the big wheel. The last thing you should do when you are that high up, is eat your seat, yet this is going to happen.

Next to me, is Carla and she is still banging on about chocolate. ‘Try some of this, it’s to die for.’ her mouth is stuffed with seat padding. The bars that a supposed to keep us safe, are made of seaside rock. My hands slurp as I pull them away, to try and stop her. Any attempt to tell her not to, is foiled by my own mouth, which no matter what, refuses to open and let out

sounds. I am trying desperately, to tell her to stop eating or we'll both die, but it comes out a continuous muffle. She tells me not to speak with my mouth full.

I awake to find the other two in the corridor, having a grown-up conversation. They are murmuring, but I can still hear them quite clearly.

'I know that we hate each other Klaa, but we can still work together.'

'Fine! But that is only because we are only three people, and we need all the help we can get.'

'Two! This Lotterby is a complete lost cause.'

'So what do you have in mind?'

'I was thinking that you could inject yourself, with something that could increase the concentration of the secretions.'

'Really? And how would you suggest we administer to seven billion humans, osmosis?'



'I was thinking about water. They are obviously getting it from somewhere. Not one of them is showing signs of dehydration. We could introduce it to the water supply.'

'You mean, save the human race by pissing in a reservoir?'

'Or we could use the Decrepit, dilute some water and spray them like crops.'

'It is a plan I suppose, but I am not Father Christmas. I cannot encompass the whole planet in one evening, with minimal resources and a cheery laugh.'

'Then what's your plan?'

'We may have to go with the human's idea.'

This lifts me up slightly, although Carla's venom has knocked me sideways. I thought she liked me.

'Even if it did work,' says Carla, 'we would only be able to affect those in range of the amplifier,

and we must take into consideration, that not everybody can be hypnotized.'

'We need more allies,' says Klaa, 'we should try that later today, after they have been for the meat.'

'Good!' Carla still doesn't sound happy about it, 'but it's just us. The Lotterby stays here.'

'No!' insists Klaa, 'I have a better idea for him.'

'What can he do that could be of any use?'

There is an extended pause. I wish they would speak quickly. I am dying to know what he has in mind.

'We need a diversion!' he says at last.

'But he'll screw that up too. Not only that, he will probably die.'

'That cannot be helped. There is an old expression that is often repeated here, it comes from one of their ancient contemporaries. It is about the survival of the fittest. It states that

only the strong remain alive and there are others, cannon fodder, sacrificed in order to win the war.'

'One life to preserve many?' says Carla. I am rapidly going off her now.

They put this to me, when I am most obviously awake. My acting like someone hearing the words for the first time, is worthy of some award. I cannot admit to being keen, about being a human sacrifice. I'm thinking there is perhaps not much of a future in it, and it might involve a degree of pain. That Zartang face is etched into my brain, like a tattoo from a drunken night out with sailors. The damage those teeth could do to a human body in the matter of a few seconds, would be incredible.

'Ok!' I say to this suicidal venture, and they tell me the plan.

'Carla and I are going to go to the town hall like

you suggested,' says Klaa, 'you are going to the ship. You are going to get them to chase you.'

'Really!' I exclaim, 'and what am I expected to do, while they are chasing me, pray?'

'Yes, pray,' Carla suggests, 'definitely pray, and run very fast!'

'As if your very life depends on it,' adds Klaa, 'like you are just about to meet your death, in the most long, drawn out, painful and violent way imaginable, because basically, that is exactly what will happen!'

I consider this very carefully, placing the idea into various scenarios. 'On your bleeding bike sunshine!' is the extensive conclusion.

'Do it for me!' Carla flutters her eyelashes. Now I know how false she is, this is not going to work this time.

'Read my lips – no way!' These are the sounds coming out of my mouth, but I am miming

something completely different. It is a skill I have picked up during my four days on the floors of Buymors. Insulting Polenorth and saying, *yes Mr. Polenorth*, at the same time, was an unofficial requisite of that job.

'Just think about it,' Klaa says and adds, 'times up!' This alien has absolutely no concept of time whatsoever. Yet in that tiny gap between thoughts, there is an even tinier eternity, where can exist a lifetime of reminiscences. I realise, that I just might die, and if that is going to happen, then there are people I should at least make some effort to say goodbye to them. It didn't occur to me until that fraction of a moment, that Steph could possibly get hurt. She is a strong woman, and no matter who you are, if she says jump, then you reply, *out of which window Steph?* I wonder if she is one of these zombie shoppers, or if her toughened,

intelligent mind has managed to bat away the beam, like whacking a budgie with a baseball bat.

So I ask Klaa to let me off the ship one more time before the next mission. To the stilled silence, I trudge slowly out of the hatch and down the gangplank onto my lawn.

## 11. big sis and the mission #2

Suddenly, I am standing outside of my sister's house (and Oliver's), daring myself to ring the doorbell. Being scared prior to crossing this particular threshold, should really be nothing new, but it is.

Is she there, or is she hiding? I give the door a gentle push, and it sweeps open to reveal her over-so tidy hallway. At the end of it, there is another open door and there is someone sitting in an armchair. It is her. She is wearing the same top as the last time we spoke.

As I draw nearer, I see that her back is straight and she is staring into space. I take a chair from the dining suite and place my bottom in front

of her. To be sure that she will not suddenly jump up and startle me, I slap her on the cheek. If she were conscious, she would have stuck her fangs into my neck in the bat of the eyelid, of a man with an infection. I begin.

'Hi Steph, you've put on weight!' I point at her podge.

*'Get on with it saddo!* She doesn't answer, obviously, this is me speaking.

'There is something I need to say to you.'

*'OK, so what bunch of crap have you got your no good arse into now, Adrian?'*

'A big bunch of crap,' I assure her still face, 'a very big bunch.'

*'And so you've come to me, to get you out of it? Well, this has been too many times too many, Adrian.'*

'Yes, it is! I wanted to tell you that I am going to go somewhere, and I might never be coming back.'



*'At last, you're actually starting to take notice of me and bugging off.'*

*'This is different Steph. I could end up a burger!'*

*'How? Are you going to have a barbecue? You always end up sitting on the grill.'*

*'No, quite literally - a burger Steph!'*

*'Well, it's a career move, if any. So how is this situation going to manifest itself?'*

*'There are these aliens, these big, tall aliens with a million teeth, dark scaly skin and four narrow eyes dripping with blood. I tried to tell you that day in the café, but you didn't believe me.'*

*'Ah! So you've encountered them before?'*

*'Yes, but that's not the point.'*

*'It is. You've encountered them before. You've come across them, and you're still alive. Surely that must tell you something.'*

I must admit, even though she is a complete

vegetable, she has a point.

'It does Steph!'

*'So whatever they are, they're not that dangerous.'*

'Thanks Steph!' I feel uplifted all of a sudden.

She may be a bit of a dragon most of the time, but does give good advice where it counts.

Before I realise what I have done, I have kissed her on the forehead, after which I need to spit, she tastes of that disgusting meat.

I go to the front doorway, and turn one more time. 'And please have the common decency if you wake up, to forget that I slapped you.' I say to her.

Having made my peace and feeling a little better, I return to the ship. There is a little more steam in my strides, as from nowhere I have received renewed confidence. Carla is even impressed, especially when I say to her, 'Alright then, tell me about this diversion and let's get

on with it.'

We are taken to the room Klaa displayed the holograms earlier, and he goes over everything I am required to do.

As soon as it is all over, we all return to the street, where we synchronise watches. They go left and I go right. All of us stick close to the hedges and the fences as we creep along the pavement to our mission. This time, it feels different. There is a rucksack on my back, which gives me some comfort, it contains everything Klaa says I need to do my job efficiently.

Before long, I feel the shadow of the Zartang ship upon me, and the reality starts to set in. Still, I try not to let it get to me. It has been explained to me that the distraction should-might be successful. Zartang ships bring their victims aboard at different times. This is so that they can monitor them more efficiently. Klaa

told me, that they do not leave their crafts if there are people aboard. I am going at the time that the one at the bottom of the street has emptied, and the others beyond it are still full. Klaa has told me also, that soon, as they near the centre of what is called the great fattening, they will switch to 24 hour opening times to speed things up.

It feels a little like a commando situation, covert operations. At last, I am getting closer to something resembling a hero. Not so much the chew toy, that distracts the Pit Bull, so it doesn't go for your kids. I am even wearing my black woolly hat that turns into a balaclava. I pull it over my face and get into a crouched position. I am all good to go.

I Give one last check to my equipment, before I get the word to go. At 4:15 exactly, I am to leap into action, like an extremely nervous tiger,

which drinks too much coffee. At 4:20 exactly, the others are going to do their thing. Then something grabs my attention. It's that ultimate cliché, when it is the end of the world and the last surviving man jumps off the roof, a phone is ringing in the house on my right. I experience a strange mixture of anticipation and nervousness. Yet it is my solemn duty as a human survivor, to go into that house and answer it. There is not a moment to lose. It could ring off at any second. I run inside, looking this way and that. Once located, I am able to swiftly follow it to the source. I end up in a study.

There is an old fashioned telephone on the desk. I snatch it from the cradle. 'Hello!'

'Good afternoon. This is a message for... Mr. *Francis Hollier...*'

'Thank god, somebody else! Listen, where are

you?’

Pause. ‘Have you, or a member of your family had an accident at work recently, or in the home?’

‘Stop speaking and listen. Stop selling insurance and tell me where you are!’

‘Then don’t worry. Here at Accidents for you, we have trained solicitors on hand twenty-four seven to handle...’ Damned automated message! Click. I should have known, welcome to the twenty-first century. Cold call pestering while you sleep. I glance at my watch, it is almost time. God that was quick!

I am soon standing right in front of that great monstrosity again, that tombstone, waiting for it to pounce on me. There is one minute to go. My hands shake as they unfasten the rucksack, that hasn’t come off my back as easily as I had originally envisaged, and the specialist

apparatus emerges from the open mouth of the bag – an electronic mega horn.

I compose myself. My legs are apart, so my body is more rigid and defiant. When I depress the button, there is an electronic crunching sound.

‘Oi Zartangs!’ I yell through the mouthpiece. ‘All your products are shit!’

Nothing happens, and so I wait patiently - that is like someone who could well end up being a patient pretty soon.

I try again. Buzz, crackle. ‘Hey Zartangs, guess who this is..? It’s me. I’m the guy who tried to break into your computer earlier, and guess what? That’s shit too!’

This time there is now a horrible rumbling noise coming from within, like nothing ever heard before. ‘Crap!’ I yell, and immediately follow my instincts and run left – no – right –

no - left. Feet stop messing around and take me away from here fast. It is as if I want to get myself to a safe distance, and all they want to do is dance.

I turn to run up the street, no, what is my head doing to me? That is the last place I want to lead them. The doors open with an angry hiss, and all of a sudden I go left before remembering there is a very tight squeeze. I don't let that get in the way of my willingness to remain alive. It is amazing how you can get something large and round, through an incredibly narrow gap, when you're being pursued by copious amounts of chomping sharp incisors attached to gigantic blood-crazed lizard men.

I hear the same angry hiss behind my back. I chance a quick glance, before running for my life, to see what must be hundreds of these things, charging through the rear doors of the



store ship with things in their claws, those laser cutters if I'm not much mistaken. They are emitting a terrifying wail, like whale song mixed with imminent death. I just get to the bottom of the street, my feet doing that indecisive dance thing again, when I hear Carla's voice wafting out through the air. The shuffling clawed feet stop immediately, as if they are all attached to the same brain. I am still running, as I glance back and my body hits a lamp post. Two are sent to chase me, while the others concerned with losing the custom of the local area, go for Carla and Klaa. Zartangs, I notice, are naturally bipedal, but they can run on all fours if they need to catch up with something quickly, as I find out to my complete and utter fear.

Now one is to my left and the other to my right, and they are snapping at me like crocodiles. My body manages somehow to swerve the advances

of their jaws. One head goes to mine and I push it back, the other trying to catch me out, goes to my stomach. I swing out with my rucksack. The weight of the megaphone inside it catches one at the knee, and it stumbles. As it is trying to regain its posture, I throw the bag at the other and make another dash for it.

Hopping over a wall, I run through an alley, whilst behind me there is the disturbing sound, the one I heard on the ship when they sliced through that smaller alien.

My back is now against the wall, literally and proverbially. I am blocked in left and right. There is nowhere to go. As split decisions go, this is a crap one. Then another appears. I'm thinking god, how many of these things does it take to take down a trembling, pathetic man?

Glancing up I see there is nothing but sky. They come to me and they are snarling, drooling,

making that lip-smacking sound you make, when you are about to eat something fabulous. They are just a few feet away from me now, and unless I can come up with some miracle solution, then this is it.

In complete desperation, I try to dash between them. But the alley is very narrow and they are very large. There is no hope for me. I feel long, rubbery hands throw me against the wall. Assumedly, this is to stun me. Anglers do this to fish after they have pulled them out of the river. I get up and feel a clawed hand across my face and I stumble. So I close my eyes to pray. Only I am no expert on religion, and there are too many gods to choose from and only seconds to do it.

All there is now, is sound and touch that dreaded touch. Hot, clammy breath is on my face like the worst kind of wind. I fall to my

knees and await my death. This is not how I imagined my end would be. I'd hoped it would be in my bed surround by people I love, the day of the great apology to my family and friends. Sorry for being a waste of oxygen. Then there is that shitty humming again and the laser thing is activated, and it swipes the air – and misses me. I look up to see a very familiar and welcome face. It is Klaa. 'Don't look at me,' he says, 'this is Carla's idea not mine. Personally, I thought her carcass was more worthy of saving than yours.'

I thank him anyway.

## 12. the redistribution of guilt

We are back at the ship, wondering if my plan worked, more people have been saved and Carla is at this exact moment, legging it back through the town yelling, 'Up yours lizard features!'

But Klaa is glancing at his lights and screens, and there is no sign of her. Guilt doesn't go anywhere near to describe my feelings. This is all my fault.

Then another noise comes from the ship. You can hear it all across the planet, as if they are all in agreement, or there has been a great announcement.

‘What’s that all about?’ I ask Klaat. ‘Have they’  
Gulp, ‘got her?’

‘The great fattening, 24-7 opening!’ He frowns.  
Klaat has a multitude of eyes, and so somehow  
this is more pronounced, thus underlines the  
intensity of the situation, in a way no human  
being ever can.

‘Can you see her now?’

‘No!’ says Klaat, ‘and there is more bad news. I  
am not picking up any more movement from  
the neighbouring domiciles. It appears that we  
have failed. Repeat - you have failed!’

‘If you had a penis Klaat,’ I reply sternly, I would  
kick you in it!’

‘What more can you expect from humans? You  
are weak and incredibly stupid.’

‘Take that back you bloody mutant tangerine!’

‘The great creator of all things, gives you  
somewhere beautiful to exist, and what do you

do with it? You use it as a toilet, a 148 326 000 km<sup>2</sup> toilet.'

'I have to say Klaa, you are annoyingly good at maths. Turn back into the cat again immediately!'

'Why?'

'So I can kick you up the arse!'

'This is humans all over,' Klaa argues, 'whenever you are confronted by any dilemma, or indeed the opportunity of coming to an intellectual conclusion, your only response is violence.'

'We find it helps sometimes,' I say. 'Anyhow, what gives you the right to tell us, we're stupid?'

'Why do you think the Zartangs are here?' One of Klaa's many tentacles slithers up the screen, and touches something too fast for me to see. Something appears on the table on the console. It is a representation of the entire universe. I know this, because I have seen this on TV, on

one of those boring programs they put on in between interesting ones. As he speaks, things swirl around and grow, as if he is doing it just by the power of his mind.

‘Here is your earth!’ he says, pointing to an insignificant dot away from all of the bigger ones. ‘And here is the Zartang home world,’ he adds, pointing to a much larger one. It contains all of the colours of the rainbow, a Zartang rainbow.’ Now, something begins to jump from one to the other to the other to the other, like an indecisive flea.

‘What’s that?’ I inquire.

‘That is, a Zartang invasion pattern. All of those planets they have visited, are now void of life, killed, mutilated and consumed by the next.’

I just had to ask. ‘Why?’

‘Because, my oddly shaped friend it is the nature of things. Worms eat decay, birds eat



worms, you eat birds and Zartangs...’

‘Why?’ I ask again.

‘Would you like me to spell it out for you?’

I nod very fast.

‘The Zartangs are at the top of the food chain, in the entire universe!’

It comes out, I don’t know how, I am just so upset. ‘I ate one of your friends!’

‘I know!’ He says, ‘They invaded my world, just before they did yours!’

‘I think it’s about time we got this ship up and going, and got the hell out of here!’

‘And go where?’

‘I don’t care!’ I say and definitely mean it. Just give me a chance to find Carla first, and bring Steph here.’

Klaa is a little sceptic. He is a very little sceptic. He doesn’t say anything. He assumes I am telepathic.

‘The good news is. I am not picking her up on any of the ships in this area. Which means she is probably in hiding.’

This is pleasing to hear at least. ‘So let’s find her!’

‘Not a very good idea,’ Klaa says, ‘if they pick you up, they will trace you right to her.’

‘Then I’ll drink more wee!’

All of Klaa’s eyes, shuffle around again. It’s like watching somebody shaking a jar that’s got marbles in it. ‘Wee, isn’t the answer to everything you know!’ he says at last.

‘But you’re clever. Surely you can come up with something to help find her, or are you saying that you are the one who is the idiot, the lower life form?’

Klaa is now offended. I never realised that this was possible. ‘How dare you! I am an intelligent being. Not like you, a shop floor cabbage

replacer!’

‘Actually, there was more to it than that. I had to unload pallets and monitor stock levels.’

‘On my planet, which is called K4192J649L57WP,’ he pauses for breath here, before continuing. ‘991SooG3Q7T2H774, I was an engineer. I designed and built things, that would actually be useful, like the anti-hunger device on the Decrepit, like the environmental blanket, which makes this ship invisible... I built...’ he turns away sheepishly.

‘What?’

‘Never mind!’

‘Go on!’

‘Nothing!’

Now, I am suspicious. Then the penny drops again, from a great height, into a very deep jam jar full of alien marbles. ‘Klaa!’ I say.

‘What?’

‘Turn the blanket off, and come outside with me!’

‘What? I can’t!’ he exclaims. ‘It will make us vulnerable to the Zartangs!’

‘Just do it!’

He is hesitant, but does what I tell him. The lights inside the ship flicker into new life. Everything on all the screens flash simultaneously, and there is a loud hum like half a sonic boom. We move to the hatch and onto the gangway. Soon, we are standing on my lawn. I turn around and can (and can’t) believe my eyes at the same time. There, right before us is another one of those damned Zartangs ships. It stretches through several gardens. It is huge. I am beginning to realise now, why the chap who lives four doors down no longer has a tool shed. I am flabbergasted. I want to hit him – again.

‘Before I say anything else,’ he adds, ‘I am

deeply, deeply sorry.'

'Say what you were about to, now!' I insist.

He does, and soon I regret it, regret having ears on the sides of my head.

'I designed the mesmirbeam.'

'You what?'

He continues his sordid, horrible tale.

'I was on a survey mission, looking for new sources of food, aboard the real Decrepit, when I was boarded by these evil creatures. They told me that I was to be taken back to their world, where I would be tested for nutritional value and calorie content.

'I pleaded with them to let me go, but they were most insistent. They said, they wanted to know where my world was, how many of my kind there were. All I could think about was, my lovely wife Yerna and all of the good times we will never be able to share if we'd died.'

‘So, you caved in,’ I suggest.

‘I did. I told them there was another world, a few more light years beyond ours, in a spiral galaxy abundant with life. They didn’t agree at first, but I told them about my skills, and about how I could make their invasions more efficient, and most importantly, about your obsession with shopping. They made me build the beam, and convert their ships to look like shops under its influence.

‘They were happy with this, and agreed to spare my planet. However, the Zartangs weren’t to be trusted. They invaded K4192J649L57WP991SooG3Q7T2H774, before I could bat forty eyelids.’

‘So, how come you have one of their ships?’

‘I stole it!’ he says, ‘I had a change of heart. I couldn’t stand by and watch the same thing happen to another world. It was disused, faulty

landing system, so it wasn't in use.

'On the way here, I constructed the environmental blanket, so that I wouldn't be seen. I picked a spot on the Earth at random. A proper landing wasn't possible, so I crash-landed near the first domicile I could see. Trust my luck to land in the wrong one!'

This still does not excuse him. This little shit, is responsible for what is happening. 'So, you what you are telling me is you sold us out to the Zartangs, had a crisis of conscious when they double-crossed you, and hightailed it here to apologise?'

'No,' Klaa is a little more sympathetic now, albeit laced with the usual patronisation. 'I was going to pass on a warning to you, see how it goes, and then apologise!'

I can stand this no longer. Uttering not another word, I storm down my garden path, to

somehow find Carla. Perhaps she has something sane to tell me.

I take some food from my fridge, and stuff it into a bag, adding some warm clothes and a bottle of scotch I found under the sofa - the necessities for surviving in the rough. There is also a small tent to keep me cosy during the night. I put it back in the cupboard. I bloody hate camping!



### 13. the search for carla

Days have now passed. I am looking at the people lining up to go to the ship, and they are all getting much rounder. This has made a significant amount of difference to the designs of the trolleys, which now have concave handles, to accommodate the bulging stomachs. This is the time of the great fattening Klaat spoke of.

I am thinking about Carla. It is important now more than ever, that I find her. The hope of ever getting the world back to normal, has now dropped away from my ankles. I am becoming increasingly depressed by the second. The most important thing now is to start anew. My original plan sounds better and better. On the downside, the human race will have to start

from scratch, begin again having lost everything we have built up over thousands of years. On the upside, I will finally get laid. My mind is wandering now about, what would be the proper procedure for end of the world dating. For instance, where would you purchase flowers, when all of the all night garages in the world have been preoccupied, with shoving disgusting body parts down their mesmerised gullet? Would aftershave still be a part of the equation? Do I still need to wear a tie? And where the hell can you book a table at a restaurant? Most important of all, how can I get somebody who finds me completely repulsive, to mate with me?

This is why pandas are on the way out. I decide that I will tell her, *'Get them off girl, or you will be responsible for the complete extinction of mankind!'*

I have to admit that as chat-up lines go, this one

takes some beating.

I am compelled to survey the damage, and go to the highest point in town - Common Court, the only block of flats that haven't been knocked down. They have been empty for quite a while. I don't chance the lift. After all, who would be on the other end of the emergency phone if I got stuck? Also, the power has probably been cut in the building. The place is a danger zone, and a great risk, but I am at the point of not caring anymore. There is not much reason for carrying on. This mission, is to see if there is any sign of Eve (what I am now calling her in my head), to see just how bad things have become, and if both of the aforementioned return a negative result, then I could always throw myself off.

Then, as I am looking down, I realise that this might be a foolish thing to do. After all, what if somehow I didn't die. What if, by some fluke

my body landed on one of the balconies on the way down, and I ended up with broken arms and legs and couldn't move? Yes, this is the reason I am staring down and thinking this, not because I'm a complete and utter coward.

There is the oddest smell of rotting things in the air. It reminds me of death – and my bedroom. Everything has gone off, even the sky, which is now a dirty brown, as if it has gone past its sell-by date. There hasn't been anyone to tend to anything. Things have wilted and died. Lawns, which would have seen a mower after an extra millimetre, are now at ankle height at least.

The kerbs are lined with dead animals, cats, dogs, horses. There is even lion. Where that came from beats me. Anyway, I decide that if I'm going to end it all, this isn't the way for me. Heights are a killer. I'm just about to make my

way back down the fifty-million steps back to terra firma, when there are signs of movement. If my hopes were a dying cat, then it just lifted an eyelid for the vet. Something dark is moving between the gaps in the houses, a van possibly, a human driving it, unless the Zartangs have started doing home deliveries. It can only be one person. But she is driving too fast. I can never catch up. However, my legs do not agree. Before there is time for any of the parts of my body, to enter into negotiations about what to do next, I'm sent hurtling back down the stairs, and moving rapidly by a form of energy I never knew I have, in the direction I saw her going in. I end up in the town. It makes sense now. Anybody choosing to use a van must have plans to fill it.

All is still in the town. It's like a scene from a film where there has been an apocalypse. There

is nothing on the streets, except for old newspapers opening and closing themselves in the breeze. An empty bottle rolls to the kerb, making a clinking sound. I get the impression that I'm not alone, then realise it's just the day playing tricks on me.

Suddenly things are even sadder – if that is at all possible. This place, which is normally overflowing with life, is now the exact opposite. Gone are the teenagers sitting around the statue of Rodney Beeching – our first mayor, gawping at their mobile phones, the smartly-dressed business men, standing around, looking all important - gawping at their mobile phones, the young mothers in bright leggings, wheeling their kids around in trendy buggies – while gawping at their mobile phones, and old hopping Billy, the chap in the dirty anorak who hops around on one leg for no apparent reason.

Everyone thinks he is odd, but only because he hasn't got a mobile phone to gawp at.

In the windows, the mannequins are very shabbily dressed. The clothes are sliding off them. All the doors are open. I consider another little help-yourself shopping spree, then decide against it. I would only end up getting a load of things I wouldn't even need.

Something breaks that thought, clanking, clunking, like stuff being thrown into the back of a – van. Once again, my legs act first. This is not the first time that I have wondered if I'd been born upside-down. Suddenly, there is the front of the van. Its grill is smiling at me. It's a small, white van adorned with rainbow colours, representing paint splashes and the words *Tim the Painter and Decorator*, (marvellously catchy me thinks.) Carefully, I make my way to the rear, picking up a large stone en route - you can

never be too careful. But I have nothing to fear. A familiar head raises itself from the bottom of the door, and smiles awkwardly.

‘Adrian!’

‘Your memory is fantastic,’ I say, ‘how are you Carla?’ She is looking rough, but sexy rough. Her dishevelled appearance somehow turns me on. She has found some leather look overalls from somewhere, a shop in the 1980’s. Her hair is hanging off her shoulders like a blonde waterfall.

‘Whatever it is,’ she says, ‘I hope it won’t take long. I’ve got some surviving to do.’

I glance in the van. There are just guns, lots of guns, and some fashionable clothes.

‘Where the bloody hell did you get that lot from?’

‘The police station!’ she replies. There is a toughness about her now, as if she had been



living on a desert island for a year, fighting off bears and living off raw penguin. She closes the doors now, as if whatever is inside is all her own personal business. 'You shouldn't even be out here,' she says, 'the beam can pick you up, and you'll be eating that horrid meat again.'

'You are out!' Then I try my luck. 'Can I have a gun please?'

'You wouldn't know what to do with it.' This is because she sees me as a complete failure.

'I think we need to talk.'

'What about?'

'You know...'

'No, I don't,' she says.

'Yes, you do!'

'No, I don't... really!'

'Do you want me to spell it out for you?'

'If you can do it in thirty seconds, then I'm driving off before the Zartangs come for me.'

'I need to sleep with you!'

'What!' she is glaring at me.

'I mean, I need to be where you are. There is nowhere on this planet, I feel safe now Carla.'

The glare drops, only it doesn't turn into anything particularly nice, just something stern and patronizing.

'You're just a little puppy aren't you Adrian?'

How dare she? I think. She can't say that to me. I'm a man. After all, who else went on that ship fully conscious, shaking like a leaf in a wind tunnel on full setting? Still, I nod pathetically, as this has always been the way of things, men bowing to women.

'Get in!' she says and opens the door. 'And keep the window down, 'I can smell you from here!'

We end up back at the town hall. 'Why here?' I ask.

'Because it's a safe place,' she replies. She gets

out of the van, and unlocks a padlock on the double doors of the building. It has a chain around it. She takes it all off in one go, and throws it into the foyer.

She returns promptly and opens up the back of the van. 'Help me get this lot inside!' she commands me.

We rush to get it all in the foyer, and she returns the chain and the lock to the door and secures it, this time from the inside. 'What do you mean, it's safe here?'

'I'll show you!' She takes me down a staircase which leads to a long corridor. We walk to the end, and there's a huge, heavy-looking door with a wheel in the front of it. She turns it and there is a strange sigh-like hiss. I was almost expecting steam to come out of it. Beyond, is something pretty remarkable, a whole hidden world. There is everything down there, TVs,

computers, bunks, kettles, fridges, a bar, leather seats, a bar, a home cinema suite, a bar, a shower, a bar... I am really missing alcohol, it has been a while. Surviving aliens is not work to do sober.

‘The mayor has a Hitler bunker!’ I exclaim.

‘Of course he has,’ says Carla, ‘if there is imminent danger, keep the idiots safe so they can govern again. It’s a very human thing.’

‘Don’t be so keen to slag us off,’ I say, ‘you’re human as well!’

We get all of the arms from the foyer, and stack them against the walls of the bunker. I’m tired when we finish, but refuse to show it. She tells me, I must be gone in the morning. She is cooking up something, a plan. I mustn’t get in the way.

#### 14. the rise of the shelf-stacker

That night, I am standing in front of the Zartang ship again. I'm armed to the teeth with fire power. Over each shoulder crisscrossing at the chest, are two automatic rifles, I don't know what they are called, but they look real badass. On my belt, are four standard police issue tear gas grenades, two on each hip. I am wearing a utility jacket, stuffed with bullets. I'm holding the meanest pistol you have ever seen, all pinched from Carla's stash. This stuff is real heavy, but hell, I can take it.

Damn that Carla, I'll show her. Look at me now woman, look at the action hero, who is about to waste some alien butt.

In my lips, is one of those cheroots. It isn't lit, they make me feel queasy, if I actually smoke

them. I don't wait for the doors to appear. I kick them in with a force I never know I have. Then the alarm goes off. That's right, Adrian is in town, and he's looking for an alien bullet party.

Inside it's dark, and you don't know where they are going to spring from. I let off some warning shots into the ceiling. There is a satisfying amount of thunder coming out this beast. Then when it dies I hear them. I'm not scared, nothing scares me now. I'm a man that's been hurt by a woman, the woman who needs me to prove my worth, before she will carry my seed. That's what her stand-offish, arsey attitude has all been about. She doesn't know I'm here, it's best she doesn't. I will prove myself once and for all.

Out of nowhere they come, too many to count. Their blood red eyes glow in the dark. I wait for

them to come in range, and then with one sweep, discharge a barrage of machine fire which lights up the room with angry flickers. As this is happening, there is an incomparable surge of adrenaline through my body. I am a train, an unstoppable train.

There is a deathly screaming at my back. I turn and cut three Zartang through the middle. I'm happy, satisfied. These bastards aren't so mean.

I run to the elevator before others appear. I take it to the top floor, where I fire off more shots into the air, to let them know the good guy's in town. As I pass the first door, one tries to take me by surprise and I cut it in half with one satisfying burst from my new pal, Mr. automatic.

Another comes around the corner. It has one of those laser things in its claws. It makes no difference to me, in seconds, in a shower of

shells, its ancient history.

Of course, I can't resist helping the helpless. I kick open the door of the abattoir, already there are the cries of gratitude within, but that is not all. As I'm unfastening one of Klaa's countrymen from a metal slab, another of those hell lizards comes running out of the back. I focus the gun on it, and a few seconds later I have blasted a sizable hole in its stomach, so big I can see the doorway. Stepping over its corpse, I go out back, there I liberate ten, no twenty, thirty leggy, orange, blobs.

'Stay at my back!' I roar at them and they do. They sludge behind me in single file, down the corridor to the elevator. I try touching the panel. It worked earlier. Hang on, there is a lot of Zartang blood on me and it's a DNA reader. I scoop some of the blood and smear it on the panel on the wall, surely enough, the doors



open willingly. I step in and the others follow. The Zartang elevators are large, but it is still a tight squeeze. Now to get to the bottom. I hadn't thought of that. If there is a lock down, then we are stuck. In frustration, I strike out at the panel inside the elevator and the strangest thing happens, we go down. The blobs are really happy now. They are jumping up and down with excitement, like weird popcorn in a saucepan with the lid on. We soon reach the bottom, and the doors separate instantly. I let out the loudest scream, accompanied by a spot more bullet action. But it coughs and splutters to a halt. I have run out of ammo. No problem. Off the shoulder comes the biggest, meanest, fattest piece of artillery, flamethrower, rocket-launcher, everything attached. There are still hundreds of these things. Where are they all coming from?

Hundreds of deadly red eyes everywhere.

Unclipping a gas grenade, I hurl one where there is soon, a thick cluster of coughing and spluttering Zartangs. I fire a volley of shots at bodies before they have time to react. I charge through them firing. My weapon has an inexhaustible supply of bullets, that's how it happens in the movies anyway. But they haven't. This one has so little in its magazine.

Taking advantage of this, something leaps onto the freezer cabinet and flies through the air towards me. We are both on the deck, where I hit it hard on the jaw several times with the rifle butt. He is clawing at my face, and there is blood spurting from my cheek.

Looking up, I see that my little orange friends bouncing out of the door. They have gotten away. The Zartang too is watching this, it is seething in anger. But this is an ideal

opportunity for me to slip between its legs. Then, throwing the useless rifle to the floor and unhooking the other, I shoot for all I am worth, as I back out of the door in glory. But not before taking out the overhead power cell, and destroying the interior of the ship, and the Zartangs with it.

I step into the street, a powerful explosion forces me out. I am surrounded by smoke and wreckage. There she is, Carla.

‘You... you did this for... me?’

‘Yes sugartits!’ I say, ‘Call it, a moving in present!’

She runs to me, and throws her arms around my neck. I feel her warm, soft breasts against me, and her face against mine. I am in heaven. We spin around and around locked in some joyous rapture. Two people merging into one... person.

‘There is only us left in the world now!’ she announces.

‘What about the beam?’ I say, ‘surely with no Zartangs there is no beam? They should be released.’

She shakes her head, and I feel a warm tear on my neck. ‘The beam killed them all Adrian. It was too much for their heads. Don’t look, because all their heads exploded and it looks really yuck!’

I’m sad and I am happy. There are no other people in the world, but she fancies me now. That’ll do.

Then over her shoulder something stirs from the body of the ship. Four, red eyes emerge from the dark, steamy fog-like smoke. There is a hum of a laser cutter and the Zartang charges.

And then...

I bloody go and wake up! I mean, I actually go

and spoil the whole glorious - me saving the world thing, and sodding well open my eyes.

And there is Carla standing over me, with a steaming mug of tea.

‘Drink this!’ she says. It is a welcome sight, the British cup of tea, curer of all ills, lifter of spirits. Planet invaded? Never mind, have a cup of tea! Somehow, though, this is exactly how I feel. The bunk is extremely comfortable. I don’t want to leave it. It’s not like the ones you see in war films, it has this thick, memory foam padding with the softest covering you could ever imagine.

I drink my tea, whilst watching Carla load the rifles I was using minutes ago in my head. She seems to know an awful lot about them.

‘I don’t know if this is the time to mention it,’ I say slurping my tea, ‘but I really think we should start making babies.’

She stops and glares at me. 'Human civilisation is on its knees, and all you can think about is sex?'

'Don't worry,' I say, 'it's not like that. I won't get any pleasure from it. It's about survival.'

Carla isn't impressed. 'Drink up and go!' she snarls.

'Well, erm, it's really nice down here, all mod cons.'

'Yeah!' she grunts. She isn't looking at me at all.

'I'm glad there's still proper food down here, I mean tinned food lasts for ages.'

'Yeah!'

'Klaa's ship was nice enough,' I say, 'but I can't say I'm very partial to that anti-hunger device. I'm a British man. I need to have a healthy appetite!'

'Yeah!'

'I've no idea how it works. I mean, how does it

replace the need for food?’

‘Are you going to drink that thing and go?’

I nod and drink the last of my tea down. I hand her back the mug, and start moving to the door, wondering if she is looking back at me yet. By the doorway, I turn. She isn’t. Sod her then!

But something grabs me by the nuts as I am climbing the stairs, and the most amazing plan pops into my head. I rush back to her in excitement to tell her about it.

15. the orange blob revisited

By the time I get to her, she is rigged out to the teeth in body armour, bullets and guns.

‘Carla!’ I enthuse, ‘the answer has been staring us in the face all this time!’

‘I haven’t got time for this,’ she slots the last tear gas canister into her belt.

‘It’s obvious! The ship! Klaa’s ship!’

‘What about Klaa’s ship?’ Carla doesn’t sound the slightest bit impressed.

‘The anti-hunger thingy. We can use that!’

‘What?’ a little better.

‘We can get Klaa to fix it, so it beams on the people.’

‘That’s rubbish!’

‘Think about it, the Zartangs’ whole *raison d’être*, is getting people to eat people. If they



can't do that they'll go.'

'That's ludicrous Adrian, there's only one way now.'

'There's an old, saying my old mum used quite often, third time lucky. Think about it. We tried locating the lead ship to turn off the beam, and that failed. We tried hypnotizing the town, and that failed. This time it will work!'

'How?'

'We'll get Klaa to duplicate the software and install it on all the ships over the net. The beam will change from attracting people, to repelling people. Of course, they won't be hungry for the meat anymore. The Zartangs will think it's a complete waste of time and bugger off!'

'No they won't!'

'Ok.' I say, 'we'll cross that bridge when we come to it.'

'By the way,' she says, 'there is another saying,

and it's quite popular I believe, that bad things always happen in threes. Now go away, I'm busy.'

'Busy doing what? Where are you going?'

She delays responding, probably not thinking that it's not all that important. 'If you really must know, I am putting right a very serious wrong.'

'You're going on that ship aren't you?'

'Yes, and don't you even attempt to follow me, or I'll do to you what I'm about to do to the Zartangs.'

'They are going to slap a bar code sticker on your forehead and stick you in the chill cabinet?'

'You are so stupid.'

But then, I'm not the one going into a flying building, stuffed with twelve foot lizard men.

I do something totally out of character for me,

'I'm coming with you.' I say.

While she is trying to talk me out of it, I begin kitting myself out. I use her as a template to dress myself, not being an experienced guerilla fighter. The bullet vest is snug on my bloated belly, and the armaments weigh a ton. That woman must have the shoulder muscles of a Spanish bull, to carry this lot.

'What are you doing?' she whines.

'Same as you,' I say. 'Come on, let's kick some Zartang arse and too hell with it.'

'You're not coming Adrian.'

'But I am. If you go out that door, I'll follow you, and when you start shooting, I will too. I don't have a clue about how any of these weapons work, but I will not let that stop me.'

She starts removing her gun belts. 'Fine! We'll take your plan to Klaa, and see what he thinks.'

'Good!'

‘But let’s get this straight, if he’s not happy with it, I’m going ahead, and you are staying on Klaa’s ship.’

I concur, with a beam of a smile. This is quite possibly the first time in the history of my whole human existence, that anybody has agreed to go along with one of my ideas.

We walk back to my house, rather than risk the van again. Carla has worked out that there are gaps in the beams. She found this out, when she raided the police station and found a gun with an infrared sight on the barrel. She was trying it out on the lawns of the town hall and saw them. This prompted her to poach a stack of infrared torches from the electrical shop.

‘This way,’ she says after aiming at the air, and I can see what they look like now, an enormous red mesh, a fishing net.

We dip into a narrow lane on a very steep hill.

My feet, which have done whatever they wanted since the beginning of the invasion, tramp speedily with the increasing force of gravity of each step. At the bottom, we dip under a grey stone railway bridge, where she begins rummaging around the middle of a wild hedgerow.

‘Have you stashed something in there?’ I ask her.

‘Nah, there’s a gap here where we can slip through.’ She soon finds it, and pulls the thick branches apart like a girly Samson. ‘You first. When you get to the other side, hold it open for me.’

This I do willingly, although when she is about halfway, I lose my grip. I have a terrible itch. The kind you only ever get if you are in a situation, where you can’t move your hands, like when you are playing a recorder at a school

concert, or holding onto the edge of a cliff. Carla is caught in the branches like a sandwich in a vice.

‘Sorry!’ I manage to pull it back again and we run across the field. This we do, with our heads down.

We traverse the landscape, going from garden fence to garden hedge to garden fence. I’m feeling a little like a Grand National horse, only the one of the horses that ends up getting shot, because it can no longer take a rider and has a broken leg. There are red scratches all over her. She will never agree to sleep with me now, no matter how much antiseptic cream I offer to apply to her person.

Our movement is now slow and bitty, as we have to stop every now and then, for her to shine her torch. The gaps are few and far between now.

We soon end up somewhere familiar, where fences and sheds have been flattened by something huge. Now that I know the truth about that ship, I will never feel the same again. As it is invisible most of the time, it is difficult to tell if it is still there. I didn't really listen, the time Klaa was explaining about what the environmental blanket did. However, bits of it visit my brain. It isn't like the things that lose visibility in films, like the magician's cape that makes him disappear, but if you tried to walk through him, you'd end up knocking him over, and he'll be really cross.

This thing works differently to that. It wraps the outside world around it, so there is only nothing. You could walk right through this, hold a tennis tournament, a family barbecue, drive a four-by-four up and down, and the ship wouldn't even feel it. Fortunately for us, this is

one of Klaa's own inventions. To the best of our knowledge, the giant lizard men have no idea it exists.

'Don't worry,' says Carla, 'he's here!' She is now directing her torch at the ship. What is revealed is the red outline of a sizeable cuboid block.

A thought comes to me. 'He's not one of those Zartangs is he?'

'What do you mean?' Carla asks.

'The Zartangs can't change shape can they? He isn't one of them?'

'No, he's not.' Carla is quite sure about this, as if she is privy to some inside knowledge of the beach ball's history, or she's studied the little git's profile page on a social network site. She doesn't stop waving the torch around. In fact, she is being more frantic about it.

'What the hell are you doing?' I ask, 'trying to wind him up?'



‘Yes,’ she says, ‘exactly that.’

‘I’ve been meaning to ask, what is it with you two?’

‘Nothing, why?’

‘He said on the ship, that I wasn’t to trust you, because you were probably some alien robot used by the invading force. He doesn’t like you for some odd reason.’

‘Is that what he said?’ She stops for a moment and starts again. ‘Well, to be honest, I’ve seen the probes roaming the street in the night. They’re quite... robot-like.’

‘So how is flashing that thing at him, helping?’

‘Like I said, he’ll get annoyed in a minute and open the door. He’s not going to risk getting his ship noticed, is he?’

Suddenly, there is hope in the air again. Three of his eyes can be seen peeking out. ‘Oh, it’s you!’ he exclaims. ‘I thought it was them.’

They've been pretty close over the last few weeks, dangerously close.'

'We need to come aboard, Klaa,' says Carla, 'Adrian has a plan.'

'Has he now,' I notice that his tone is exactly the same as Carla's has been, not very accommodating. Still, he lowers the gangplank onto the lawn.

We are climbing into the ship, and there is another of those eerie sounds. It is very similar to a blue whale, that had been handed a trombone and told play *Tchaikovsky's violin concerto in D major or your mother dies*.

'What the hell is that?' I ask him. The gravest expression lands on Klaa's face.

'Something very bad,' he says, 'I've heard it before on my planet. It means that your people are now fat enough for them. It heralds the great cull.'

This is alarming my ears, like nothing else could. I am pushing past Carla as I dash through the house, and make my way to the street. There, the bizarre, macabre dance of doom is happening again. This time, there are no trolleys to guide them blindly into the abyss. This time, they *are* the meat.

All of a sudden they all look enormously fat. As if every single one of them lived next door to a fish and chip shop, and developed a lard addiction. Their legs are now so round, that they cannot put their feet together without starting a fire in their trousers. Their bottoms provide a perfect counterbalance to their stomach, like this is some new evolution of man to accommodate the new form, and every single one of them has their arms out wide in a letter T shape, because they are too fat to rest against their torso.

I know I shouldn't laugh, but as they are marching off down the road, there is tuba music playing in my head. I stand by the front gate for a while, as if I am waving the locals off to fight in the Great War.

They file past me. I don't recognise any of them anymore. They are all farting, as if they are deflating only they're not. All the dignity is gone from them. I watch them trump off to their doom. This is the end of the human race, farting off down the road to be slaughtered and given away to the next unfortunate world to consume, and the wheel just keeps on turning.

I slowly trudge back to Klaa's ship. Of course, I always knew this was the end of the world, It just didn't really sunk in, until now. My lips are struggling to part, and emit the words I want to say to Klaa. I have some sympathy for him now, I know how he feels.

'Will they, you know, die tonight?' I ask him.

'No,' he says. 'They have to do an inventory, a stock check, look at who is suitable for display.'

'And how long will that take?'

'A couple of days, and then they will as you say, *laser the shit out of them*, like they did my people.'

'Now, would be a good time to tell him about your plan,' says Carla.

16. the very bad time, just before the worst time of all

The last few words of my plan, bounce off my lips all by themselves. Considering the feelings of desperation, despondence and utter depression, I think I did quite a good job of making it all sound reasonably feasible. If it were a book and everybody wasn't about to die, I'd be thinking about film rights. Yet there is that same expression on both of the faces. The - *did he really say that, or did he just fart through his mouth again?*

'No matter what you think,' I say in my defence, 'it's all we've got, and the worst thing that could possibly happen, is just around the corner.'

Carla smiles now, - ish. 'He's got a point I s'pose. We should at least kick the idea around.'

Maybe there's some part of it, we can use.'

The ship interior, is exactly as it was the last time I was there. I ask him why it wasn't the same as the others. On the way to the observation room, he puts me straight. 'The journey to this world is light-years long,' he informs me. 'I thought the décor was a little too depressing, plus I was quite bored.'

'Fair enough!' I say.

We arrive at the observation room, where Carla and I sit watching Klaa fiddle with a few devices. Unrecognisable images, flash back and forth, intertwine and beep. When he's finished, he kills it all, and aims all of his eyes in our direction.

'Well?' says Carla.

'It's...'

'What?'

'Feasible, only...'

‘Only what?’ I intervene.

‘The Zartang tech crew is very on the ball, or now that things are getting serious they will be and since you balled things up during your last visit.’

‘Is that a problem?’

‘It is if you want me to install software onto their network without them noticing. It would be much the same, as walking onto the ship and telling them to move aside because you want to sabotage their systems.’

‘What about another diversion?’ asks Carla.

‘Hey,’ I volley the notion back over the net, ‘I’m not getting them to chase me again. I was nearly sausage meat last time.’

‘I was thinking about explosions.’

‘Using what?’ I challenge her. ‘I didn’t notice any dynamite in the bunker.’

‘But there is a generator, which is designed to



operate in the event of an electricity blackout. There's diesel to operate it in the fuel store, along with matches and wicks.'

It occurs to me now that she is finally coming around to the idea. Perhaps this is just to annoy Klaa. This appears to be her favourite pastime.

'I'm not sure about this,' Klaa replies, 'after all, it involves risks. If you handle the explosives wrongly, you could wind up achieving your dreams, and visiting a hundred different parts of the country at exactly the same time.'

'So it's alright to send me onto the ship to be pounced on by things with more teeth than Dracula's wedding album?' I say.

Nobody responds to this. It is like I am not there.

'I'll take the risk,' Carla insists. She then does something I would never expect her to do. She grabs hold of me, pulls me close and puts her

arm around me. I am thinking – game on! But this isn't the case at all. 'Take a look Klaa, take good, hard look. Somebody has to make those explosions, which one of us are you going to trust, me, or the one man who had problems with putting vegetables on top of one another for four days?'

'That's a good point,' whines Klaa.

I do not agree. Anyway, at the time Buymors was hell, the worst kind of hell, the hell you are sent to if you are in hell, and you do something really, really bad. You call it four days of shelf-stacking. I call it a living death. What still hurts, even now, is that there wasn't even a whip round. Nobody even went round with a card for everyone to sign. That was it, the fact that I wasn't appreciated. OK, I wasn't there long enough to make friends, but that's hardly the point.

‘Let me go back to the bunker and get everything I need.’ Says Carla, ‘You can show me how to rig it Klaa, if it makes you feel better.’

‘Very well,’ says Klaa.

Carla wastes no time she goes to the doorway.

‘Open the hatch and I’ll go get it.’

‘Wait,’ I say, ‘I’ll give you a hand.’

She looks at me raises a smile and drops it. ‘No need veggie man. I’ll take one of the cars in the street.’

‘But what about the beam?’

Carla and Klaa are staring at each other, albeit from different heights. It’s as if they are privy to a joke that I’m not. ‘The beam will be off now,’ she says.

I say, ‘How do you know that?’

‘Think about it, there’ll be no need to have it on. Everybody will be on board the ships. That’s

why we've got to act fast.' And she disappears from sight.

Now is the waiting game. I wish I could go with her to keep her safe. True, she does hate me like it is the latest mania, and she is more capable than me, but I need to make sure she's alright. Then I feel incredibly selfish. I'd been so obsessed with the woman who's been a part of my life for a couple of months, and I've forgotten the woman who has been in my life for absolutely all of it - my big sis. Right this minute she is probably getting wedged into a holding pen ready for... slaughter, and all I can think about is my love life.

Klaa poses a question and fires it in my direction. 'There is one thing about your plan that is bothering me.'

'What's that then haemorrhoid features, that it might actually work?'

‘No, the fact that you are comfortable about waking them up while they are on the ships. Do you want them to be conscious while they are having their offal removed?’

This gets my back up a little, but as I have reminded people all along, I am British. ‘One thing you need to learn about us humans Klaa, is that we are a resilient species. We grow and we adapt. We are strong. We can accomplish remarkable, impossible things, and when it’s all done and we’re completely knackered, we’re not too proud to get at the back of a queue for something we don’t even really, actually need.’

‘So what are you saying?’

‘That when those people on those ships wake up, they won’t just stand there, they will fight. OK, they’ll scream like newborn babies at first, but as soon as they get over the shock, they will rise up against those lanky, scaly, toothy

bastards and fight for their freedom.’ There is so much more I want to add to this, like all the historical events that have done more than prove that we as humans, have broken through the boundaries endurance, however the little shit yawns all of the way through the speech.

Klaa waves a tentacle over the panel, and a three dimensional map comes up. ‘Before you ask, I am going to monitor Carla’s progress.’

This rouses my attention, so I join him. ‘So where is she now?’

‘Do not fret Earth person,’ he points, ‘observe that blue dot.’ He touches it and it grows into the Ferrari I stole earlier, speeding around the turning to the town hall. She parks it adjacent to the van and runs to the doors.

‘Few!’ I exclaim, ‘she made it.’

‘Just relax. Carla is wise and strong. The very last thing she will do is get caught.’

Carla runs through the foyer, but not in the direction of the stairs to the bunker. Klaa reduces the images again. 'Why did you do that for?'

'She has gone to the lavatory,' says Klaa, 'give a girl some privacy.'

'Oh!' A few minutes later she is back. She is unwinding the wheel on the bunker door. We watch as she drops plastic tubs of fuel on the foyer floor, and a box with an assortment of useful paraphernalia in it.

'She's got some muscles on her hasn't she?' I remark. 'That would take me more trips than that.'

She loads the fuel tubs and the box into the back of the van. She doesn't bother to lock up, there is little need now. With everything loaded, she begins driving back. However, and not for the first time, she does something completely

unpredictable, she takes a different turn, left instead of right.

‘No! No! No!’ says Klaa.

‘Where’s she going?’

‘Perhaps she has decided to go a different way, because of her load, free of potholes.’

I look closer, ‘That’s the way to the ship, the other one, not this one.’

‘Damn it! I never did trust that woman, she is headstrong and unpredictable. She is a liability to any mission, a menace.’

‘You’ve changed your tune. A moment ago, she was strong and a force to be reckoned with.’

‘Shush!’ Klaa manipulates the imagery. Carla is on the ship. When she gets out of the van, she is wearing a bullet vest and holding one of the assault rifles. She places the plastic tubs in a line in front of the place, the doors appear and steps back to a safe distance. Then she blasts



them one by one, causing one explosion after another. Each one sprays the front of the building with fuel and fire. However, these ships are not of this world. There is strange steam coming from the walls, and the fire is gone.

Four Zartangs with laser cutters emerge. In minutes they surround her, towering over her menacingly.

She tries to fire at them, but they move swiftly and knock the rifle out of her hands. Now there are four red laser cutters next to her face. Carla raises her hands and surrenders, the situation is hopeless.

She was right, bad things really do happen in threes, not third time lucky.

## 17. the return of the shelf-stacker

A darkened shroud falls on Klaa's ship. It is as if humanity has bought hope, worn the tee-shirt and sold it on an online auction site. It feels now as if there is absolutely nothing we can do to stop these bastards. All attempts so far, have gotten on a cheap, last minute flight to the land of lost causes, one way ticket, new identities.

I am arguing with Klaa, who disregards just about everything I say, as little more than projectile vomiting. 'There is little point in proceeding with the plan now, as there is no way of us being able to distract them long enough to install the anti-hunger software.'

'There's me!' I say, 'let me do it.'

'No way,' he laughs, this is the first time I have heard him do this. The laughter itself is laughable.

‘Why the hell not?’

‘Because that would be like sending a child, and not even a child with the ability to comprehend the mechanics of the situation, more a child who lies in the cot and just dribbles.’

These words hurt, even from something that resembles a swimming pool inflatable.

‘There’s a woman I love on that ship,’ I cry, ‘and also my sister, and we need to get them back’

Klaa is thinking. His eyes, shuffle and all of his tentacles are locked behind his back, like a deformed war general. ‘Maybe there is still time to think of something. They will not start slaughtering them all just yet, just a select few.’

‘Why?’

‘A treat for the men, for the marvellous work they have done since the invasion.’

‘Ah,’ I say, ‘sort of like a staff barbecue?’ Straight afterwards I realise that the woman I love, could

so easily end up as savoury ribs.'

Klaa turns to face me, and I can see something in all of his eyes that was never there before, a determination to get something done, to storm the ship with absolutely no regard for his own personal safety. I know this well. It is a look that I hoped to acquire for myself, to be brave, fearless and have the admirable ability to put others before myself.

Now that the beam is off, it is fairly safe to go out again, and so I go for a walk to clear my mind. Sometimes all the things in my head get knotted together and I can't tell one thing from the other. The fresh air can loosen the threads a little. However the problem is now, that the air doesn't smell sweet anymore, it is sour and putrid.

I find myself returning to the house where we first met, not that it is our house of course. It is

Mrs. Bailey's residence. The door is open and everything inside is exactly as it was then.

I sit in the warm, comfy chair by the hearth and picture her coming through the door, with her golden locks cascading off her shoulders, not tied back as it was then. She is smiling for me. She hasn't done that yet. Her teeth shine like polished pearls, as she leans in for that kiss I have longed for so much. Automatically, my eyes close to receive it, only her face undergoes some strange metamorphosis in my head, and she is suddenly scrawny and wrinkly.

But it is too late, our lips have merged and suddenly she is Mrs. Bailey. My mind just can't separate her face from this house. Then, my eyes open in fear and disgust, and I get the fright of my life. Standing right in front of me staring into space is the old woman herself. She is waiting to sit in the chair. Nervously, I stand

up and she replaces me.

‘Why have they sent you home?’ I muse, and then it comes to me. The Zartangs are interested in meat. Old meat tends to be unpalatable. They are sending the pensioners back. Mrs. Bailey is obviously still under. The effects of the beam must take a while to wear off.

I do the only sensible thing, and run out screaming. Only I’m screaming at very low volume, as not to alert the invading lizards.

Once I’m on the street, I stare blankly at the shiny black ship which has become a dominant and an annoying feature. It is so frightening, so impenetrable, so huge. How could anybody get into that now? The doors on all of the ships are now sealed. They have no more need of us. We are just meat, and Carla and my sister (and her husband, Polenorth) are no longer people, but

products and also byproducts, and as good as dead.

I don't know how long I'm there for. It could be the best part of an hour, totally unaware of anything behind me. My legs are shaking, as if attached to a pair of charged electrodes, as I slowly and carefully turn. Then there it is, the last thing I want my eyes to see again, one of those bloody Zartangs, its four diagonal eyes burning fiery red, its tall, leathery skin glinting in the sun, its long, curly, pointed talons digging and scraping into the concrete.

Now I feel differently about it. Now I'm not afraid. God, what is happening to me? There it is as large as life – even larger, and I don't want to go off screaming in the other direction. It is because while I was gawping at the ship, something happened to me. Something inside me clicked into being.

'Let them go!' I yell, 'They've done nothing to you.' And then I charge at it like a steam train. I punch it in the stomach (or rather where I think one might be), kick it in the knee and then what I assume to be, its breeding parts. God knows where all of this has come from, but it is there.

I then run back to Klaa. I know what I must do now, storm the ship with no regard for my own safety and take down as many of them mind-controlling alien psychopaths as I can.

When I reach Klaa's ship, there is no sign of him, but there is a holographic message on the computer console.

*'Greetings human. If you are wondering where I am, I have gone to the Zartang ship. I will try to liberate as many of the prisoners that I can. Do not attempt to follow. You will not be successful. You humans cannot do anything right.'*

'You can talk!' I tell the twelve inch light



representation of the orange ball.

*'Well, let's look at the evidence shall we? My lips move, and sound comes out.'*

*'A recorded message that can use sarcasm,'* I observe. It continues.

*'You... humans are ignorant, wasteful creatures.'*

*'I'm not standing here listening to a lecture on climate change, from a deformed tangerine.'*

*'Well, you're going to. Your world is a beautiful ball in space, a jewel, a gift from your Heaven. Yet what do you do with it? You reap its fruity goodness, and basically do a steaming great poo all over it.'*

*'Watch it alien!'* I am snarling, *'this is my planet you are slagging off here.'*

*'You compose hundreds and thousands of poems about trees, and then you go and make it your mission to get rid of them all...'*

*'I said watch it!'*

*'You sing, All things Bright and Beautiful, and then*

*you set about destroying all of the things you are singing about. Two thirds of your world is covered with water, yet you breed and breed, until you all end up falling into it. You praise yourselves for being the most intelligent species, and yet you eat more than you need to, ingest things that kill you, burn the things that eat up all the oxygen that keeps you alive. And worst of all...'*

*'Go on alien filth,' I growl, 'spit it out, I dare you!'*

*'You've known for years that it is going to be your undoing, yet you just carry on doing it anyway! You are all imbeciles!'*

I return to the house, panting, seething. Sitting in my comfy sofa I have a strange, powerful urge to get the kettle on to calm me down. However the water is rank. There has been no one to purify the water supply for weeks, and there is God-knows-what in it. Still, I'm quite

tempted.

Then something switches on the inside, another light. My possessed mind drifts over to the bunker, and the guns that Carla left behind. In the space of half an hour I'm there, having taken the Ferrari.

I grab everything my hands can touch; grenades, machine guns, knives, anything that is going to cut, rip, blow bits of those damned lizards and throw them into the passenger seat and the foot well.

The tyres screech rather impressively, as I pull up at the black ship. As I emerge from the car, the sight of it enrages me further, fuels my rage. My eyes don't leave it, as I cover my body with the bullets and the weapons. I'm like a walking armoury.

Moving, is incredibly difficult with all this on. My body has never seen a gymnasium. I remove

some things and it is better. Funny, but with me feeling like this, these ships don't look so huge. I prepare myself with deep breaths to help me focus, to keep things clear, and then when the time is right, I charge at it screaming until my lungs burst. It's just like my dream when I was brave, only it's not a dream now, but a fulfilled prophecy.

I squeeze the trigger on the rifle, and bullets rip into the hull. They don't even make a single dent. It appears to be made of something stronger than we have on Earth. That doesn't stop me from trying though. I'm so close to it now, that my nose almost touches the door. Then, just as I'm hitting it with the butt end, there is a loud hissing above my head. I look up and it's gas of some kind.

I step away from it. But it is too late. The energy is seeping away from me. I feel weak and my

eyes close all by themselves. I'm thinking, 'What's the matter with you, eyelids. You have so much energy, why are you doing that?' And then everything goes black. They've got me. It's over.

My eyes snap open to the foulest smell; sweat, urine, farts, sick and poo. All around me, there are people and blobs like Klaa. The stomachs on them all are bulging, as if they had all taken a year-long sabbatical to do nothing but eat. It is dark and gloomy like before, except for a single shaft of light from high up. There's sawdust all over the floor, although it could be something else. I am in some sort of pig pen.

The ones who share it with me are like me, fat but not morbidly obese enough to be considered food. The other pen is filled with those who are fat enough. Beside me there is a woman. She has a beige dress with blood stains

down the front. She is conscious, but still dazed.

‘Do you know what’s going to happen to us?’ I ask her, ‘have they said anything?’

‘They don’t speak,’ she says tearfully. ‘They just feed you that rotten meat, and you have to eat it or they kill you. There were five others who came in with me, and they were killed with those laser knives. Dead, just because they were from the vegetarian society, or perhaps they were just really fussy eaters.’

‘Listen,’ I say, ‘have you seen a woman, a blonde woman, ponytail, face of an angel, only the kind of angel who would make other angels severely depressed with jealousy?’

‘There are a lot of women here,’ a short man in a heavily stained Hawaiian shirt next to her replies, ‘a number of them could be blonde. You can’t tell with all the shit all over them.’

My eyes scan the room, where there is moaning, misery and despair. I begin to move away, however, there is something stopping me. I glance at my feet and see that I'm wearing manacles. There are no chains attached to them, yet they are annoyingly effective.

'Carla!' I yell out. 'Carla!'

'Is that her name?' the woman asks.

'You're very astute,' I tell her, 'have you seen her then?'

'No!' she says after a small pause, 'I just thought it was a nice name.'

This is no time for a rude reply. There is a yelping kind of noise, and creaking chains over our heads. It's that meat again.

'There's no time for this.' I begin pulling myself away. 'Carla! Carla!' I'm using all my strength. Surely something's got to give. All I get for my troubles is sore ankles. Around me the others

are eating the meat, although baring sour expressions. I don't care about what they are going to do to me. There is no way that shit is entering my mouth.

But they seem to have other plans. My body is thrown against the wall by some invisible beam, my mouth is opened by magic, and that foul shit is shoved in.

'That's new!' the woman says, 'usually they just kill you.'

Days pass, or possibly weeks, there is no way of telling in this terrible place. I glance at my stomach, it's every bit as round as it feels. It's so depressing. Not so much because I'm fat, but because it is because they have won.

One of the Zartangs comes, he measures it with a scanner which shoots a bright green beam, and gropes various parts of my anatomy in no particular order. I'm wondering how much



longer it's going to be before they put me through the meat slicer. There are fewer of us in the pen now, and nearly all of the blobs in the other one have gone. They are taken away in groups of ten or twelve about half an hour before the meat comes. Then it dawns on me, they are force feeding us the blobs.

The meat isn't so bad after the first one hundred slices. It improves in taste, going from old sofas soaked in month old dishwater, to something slightly more edible. I think about Carla, and wonder if she is the size of a bungalow too. It doesn't matter if she is, I'd still do her.

There is no sign of Klaa, then for all I know I might have eaten him already. He could be the vomit down my shirt, or the diarrhoea in my pants. There are no toilets here. The Zartangs don't think it's worth issuing them to food

produce. We just get a good hosing down afterwards. I just hope that Carla isn't having to suffer these indignities.

What beats me is, if Klaa and his fellow blobs can change shape, why don't they all turn into earwigs and scuttle out when the doors are open. I hear the screams and wonder that.

Then for a while, there is the most disturbing silence. There is the awful feeling that something terrible is about to descend upon us.

We all huddle together, it is human instinct to do this in a crisis, that or get the kettle on. We are like this until the next morning.

Along with the daylight, two of them appear. They have those laser knives, they are waving them about brazenly. By some strange sense of irony, we are to be killed at dawn.

We are taken up to the first floor, and I finally see Carla. She is in the doorway. She is escorted

off the ship by a Zartang. I wait, and they don't return. There is one thought rattling in my head, she is being taken out to be executed. Then something strikes me on the back. It's my group's turn to leave.

We are at the bottom of the gangplank and there is no sign of her, I was right. The manacle is removed, with some anti-magnetic unlocking device. I feel the blood in my leg circulating again. I look around, and there are hundreds of weary people who don't have a clue what day it is.

With no instruction at all, my hands go to the back of my head, and I close my eyes, awaiting what's coming next. But all there is is a hissing sound of the doors closing behind me. My eyes open again and we are all standing there and still alive. The Zartangs are back inside their ship.

Suddenly, the ground begins to rumble like there is an earthquake. A high pitch hum pierces the air, followed by a blast of warm air, which turns into a hurricane and the ship starts rising from the ground. It hangs in the air for a moment, the huge black shiny brick. I am convinced they are going to fire on us. But they don't. Hundreds and hundreds more are in flight. In the flick of a fly's wing they are nothing more than dots, and then nothing at all. Relieved, and also confused, I turn and start walking towards home and I see Carla, now fat Carla, with accompanying stains and the smells. She is with the Zartang that escorted her to the street. Ignoring him, it, I run towards her and throw my arms around about fifty percent of her waist. But she isn't all that receptive. She pushes me away.

'It's alright,' I say, 'I don't care what you look

like. We can be together, now it's all over.'

'Adrian,' she says softly, 'I'm sorry...' She places a hand on the Zartang, and he begins to change shape, from a tall, scaly monstrosity, to a small orange ball with multiple legs and eyes. It's Klaa.'

'What?!' I yelp, 'you mean you and - him?'

'Yes,' she says, 'only it's not like that, prepare yourself,' and she too changes shape, from that gorgeous, albeit rounded blonde beauty, to something identical to Klaa. I get it now. She is another one of his kind.'

'This is Yerna,' says Klaa, 'my wife.'

He goes on to explain everything. Yerna was outraged, about him selling his kind out to the Zartangs, and so she stowed away on his ship and came to Earth to have her revenge. Only now the situation is different. Instead of divorcing the little orange swine as she

originally intended, she has a duty to stay with him. They are the last two of their species, and have to return home to make lots of babies together. They have to repopulate the species.

I ask them about the tale of the hypnosis. That is, or rather was Yerna's job on their world. She was one of those therapists who wean you off smoking by making you sleep.

With that all over, with the death of my dream and the human race spared, there is one question I have for Klaa. Why? Why were we spared?

He tells me why, the irritating truth. The Zartangs who took part in tasting the new human flesh, fell seriously ill. It appears that we taste so foul to them, that we are completely useless. The upshot is, that we are the least palatable of all the species in the entire universe. In short, we humans, are not only an

inferior species, we aren't even good quality meat.

So now would be the great summing up, and the coming to terms with what has gone on. It is going to take considerable time for things to get back to anything the least resembling normal.

A hand lands on my shoulder. I turn around and see my sister. I ask her where her husband is.

'He's gone,' she says, 'Oliver's gone, they ate him.'

I am humbled. The man was a ferret and a jobs worth, but I would never in a million years have wished that upon him. It's a strange feeling to think that in the end, he was instrumental in saving the human race, even if it was by being eaten.

As for me, I am going to lead a nice, clean sober

life, get my head down, get a job and be a decent member of society.

Really? After all this shit?



Philip Gilliver, is a Wrexham multi-genre author constructed in a laboratory by scientists with a suspicious laugh. He escaped to Wrexham in North Wales the moment his limbs functioned correctly. Here, in the wonderful Welsh wilderness (check out the alteration there!) he works at the enormously interesting task of trying to put words in exactly the right order for an expecting open-mouthed readership. So far, he has been successful at putting together a Young Adult thriller entitled 'Projector', an illustrated children's comedy containing a cheese-chomping, guitar-strumming Tyrannosaurus Rex, various twisted shorts and a supernatural

comedy with the somewhat whimsical title 'A Tale of Two Brians.' Philip has an honours degree in Literature with Media.

ALSO BY PHILIP GILLIVER FROM  
AMAZON

Young Adult/Adult Horror/Science Fiction

Projector – The Making of Leon Black  
Deadworld

Adult Comedy

A Diary of Two Brians – Or how I became a possessed person (without actually noticing).

Stupid Yoomins

For Children

Jurassic Jack and the Search For a Scary Thing

Compilation

In Pieces, a collection of short stories with a twist,  
excerpts and rhyme.