

The Big Bang Burger Bar

by
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This book was written for all the fans in the galaxy

Chapter 1

Ford Prefect woke up with a headache. A gargantuanly staggeringly pounding 17-too-many-pan-galactic-gargle-blasters kind of headache. This didn't bother Ford very much, as he'd woken up with similar, or worse, raging headaches before. It was the fact that he woke up at all that Ford found slightly odd, as the last thing he remembered was that he'd been suddenly snuffed out of existence due to a complicated bit of reverse temporal engineering involving a confused and angry teenager, Vogons, and a self-important black flying book.

But Ford had learned long ago to roll with whatever came along and so, despite the fact that moving his eyeballs in their sockets felt like being given eight or ten good whacks across the forehead with a cricket bat, he felt pretty good.

After a few moments of readjusting his metabolism and concentrating on simply breathing, he looked around and determined that he was in some sort of plain but vaguely familiar office cubicle. It was not at all unusual for Ford to feel like he'd been in this particular office cubicle before though, because office cubicles are designed to be vaguely familiar to everyone. More to the point, these "Happiwall Workplace Sectioners" were designed "for happy, comfortable, motivated employees," as the the sales representatives for the Habrathet Standard Interior Wallforms Company are eager to tell you even if you don't want them to.

After a few more minutes of rubbing his head and making sure that all of his body parts were present and blood was in fact flowing to his brain, Ford determined that no, he obviously *had* been killed and he was now in Hell.

But Hell or no Hell, he needed a drink. He got up and furtively wandered out into the maze of cubicles. Sunlight blazed in through a wall of windows but as much as Ford wanted to take a peek outside to get some idea of where he was, his screaming eyeballs told him to stay

“Oh, it doesn’t matter. I couldn’t get anything to grow anyway. I thought i might get some tomatoes this year, but i won’t know now.” He looked angrily at the brown spaceship, then back at Ford. “But i’m very happy here, Ford,” continued Arthur, looking back at his flattened tomato plants. “I’m happy, and relaxed, and, er...”

“Bored?” suggested Ford.

“Extremely,” sighed Arthur. “I’ve spent the last three days trying to find the most absolutely perfect blackberry from a blackberry patch down the hill, but every time i find a good candidate, i feel compelled to eat it, and then i have to hunt for another one.”

“Blackberries, eh?” said Ford, standing up. “Have you ever had a Gnaxpian flumberry? Big as your hand and sweeter than anything you’ve ever tasted!”

Arthur looked at Ford, then around at the pathetic excuse for a house that they were standing in, then out at the interstellar spaceship parked on his garden. It only took him a few minutes to grab his towel, pack his travel bag, and collect the two or three belongings that he felt he might like to have with him if he was going to visit another planet. he followed Ford out the door.

The ugly oddly-angled brown spaceship lurched up from the soft earth of Arthur’s former garden, did a quick half-spin, then bounced upward into the clear blue sky and the beckoning blackness of space beyond. As it tore away, a sleek, silver spaceship descended gracefully down to Arthur’s harvester house and parked lightly on its spindly legs. A tall gray-green alien stepped out and walked up to the open door.

“Arthur Philip Dent?” it said, looking down at the clipboard in its hands. Then it looked up and around at the harvester’s ramshackle interior.

“Hello?” it said. “Is anybody there?”

Chapter 2

Arthur Dent woke up to the cacophony of an all-bass-drum marching band practicing precision pounding in an airplane hangar while a road crew tore up pavement and revved top-fuel dragsters right next to them. It took a few moments for Arthur to realize that the sound was in fact his own blood attempting to move around inside his skull and that he was actually nowhere near an airplane hangar or a top-fuel drag strip but on a landing of what appeared to be an echoey stairwell. Arthur tried to remember how he’d gotten here, but that just made his brain hurt, so he stopped trying to do anything and just sat until he felt like doing something besides sitting.

After a long while, the drum corp had subsided to a not totally unpleasant thudding and Arthur decided to have a look around to see where he was. He was definitely in a stairwell. The door next to him had a large 4 on it. From what he could piece together from his memory, he had been at a club with Ford Prefect, his daughter Random, and two Trillian/Tricia McMillans. He must have had one too many at the bar and made it back to the hotel, only to pass out in the stairwell. This explanation made a lot of sense to Arthur, and Arthur liked things that made a lot of sense. It neatly explained where he was, why he was there, how he felt, and why he couldn’t remember leaving the bar.

Feeling much better, despite the apparent hangover, Arthur decided to go down to the lobby, since he wasn’t sure if his room was on the fourth floor or not, and since there weren’t any windows in the stairwell, he wasn’t even sure if it was night or day, so it would be best to check at the front desk so as not to bother anyone on the floors. He searched his pockets for a room key but, finding nothing, he shrugged and figured that if he checked in, the hotel must have a record of it and someone at the front desk could tell him his room number. He set off down the stairs.

The number on the door of the next landing down said 7 which

Chapter 65

Ford kicked the small refrigerator next to him closed and sat down at the controls of the small, oddly-angled brown spaceship that he'd borrowed from a friend of a friend of a friend. Actually, he wasn't exactly sure who along that line were really friends, but it was easier than saying "an acquaintance of an acquaintance of an acquaintance." But whoever the friend or acquaintance was at the other end of that line from Ford, he or she obviously had horrible taste. Ford had kept opening the refrigerator after every hyperspace jump in the hope that the nine different containers of pureed glob-fish salad would have somehow transformed into something approaching edible, but each time he was faced with the same nine different containers of pureed glob-fish salad. he knew that somewhere in the galaxy, pureed glob-fish salad was considered a delicacy and he made a mental note to find out where that place was and never go there.

Ford snapped out of his momentary reverie, grabbed the controls, and sent the spaceship hurtling down toward a familiar-looking group of islands on the familiar-looking planet below him. When he'd gained entirely too much speed, he slammed on the retro-thrusters and with a number of thunderous bangs, pulled out into a gentle cruise just above the rolling hilltops. He aimed for a low hill just off to his left, quickly spotted what he was looking for, and set the ship down with a heavy thump right next to it.

It, to a casual observer, was a broken-down and abandoned harvesting machine. To an even more casual observer, like Ford, it was a house. Many bits and pieces of many other broken-down machines had been attached to the harvester to form a cozy little living space which looked capable, for the most part, of keeping out the wind and rain.

Ford walked in, found no one home, went straight to the refrigerator, and was not at all pleased to find that it contained a dish of

Chapter 3

In most of the civilized galaxy, stairwells exist in buildings mostly because of beaurocracy. Some well-meaning civil servants somewhere decided that every building needed an alternate route of escape in case of an emergency. Everyone thought that this was a good idea so it was written into the galactic building codes that all buildings must have a stairwell at each end. This of course raised quite a lot of problems with round buildings and eventually the stewards of the galactic building codes decided that, rather than attempting to revise the building codes, which would have taken more lifetimes than the stewards felt like giving up, it would be far simpler to just ban all round buildings.

The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy has this to say about stairwells: "Good places to hide, if you can find one."

Stairwells are hard to find because it was soon discovered that modern buildings only needed stairwells when people couldn't get to the elevators, and since modern buildings had modern disaster-abating technology, there has never been a case where people couldn't get to the elevators. And in the cases where all of the elevators were unable to function, well, that's never happened either since elevator technology had achieved a level of reliability unsurpassed in the people-moving industry. About the only thing that might require the use of a stairwell was some catastrophic explosion, but since elevators were all built with the ability to see slightly into the future, they could all scurry to the basement just before the blast and be back up to the upper floors in seconds, ready to rush people to safety with a friendly "ding!".

Because of all this, most modern building managers locked the stairwells so that they wouldn't have to monitor them. Some clever architects started building stairwells that had doors merely painted on. And in a few agricultural areas savvy building managers earned extra income by renting out the stairwells to local farmers for storing grain.

Arthur, Slartibartfast, and the computer screen again. Arthur looked at Slartibartfast, who shrugged.

“Out, i suppose,” he said. He shrugged again and walked away, leaving Arthur standing in front of the strange purple thing, one of who’s eyes blinked shut when Slartibartfast walked away, vanishing into its purpleness, leaving just two oddly-placed eyes, one on the computer screen, one on Arthur.

“May i help you with anything else?” said the purple tortoise thing politely. “The tasting rooms are just down the corridor to the left—”

“Ford!” interrupted Arthur, who barely realized that he’d just rudely interrupted the purple tortoise thing, since he wasn’t even listening to what it was saying anyway. “Where’s Ford Prefect?”

“Ford Prefect,” echoed the purple thing. “Arrived last week with entity Fenchurch Pan Dowdy. Departed twenty-five minutes ago with entity I’m Not Telling You My Name You Weird Purple Thing.” The eye that had been looking at the computer screen snapped up so that both eyes were looking at Arthur now. “No, i don’t know where they were going,” it said, before Arthur could ask.

Chapter 5

Ford had no qualms whatsoever about disturbing people. It was people who disturbed him that got to Ford. And right now the figure standing in front of him disturbed him plenty. He was a good head-and-a-half taller than Ford, with double-jointed arms that hung below his knees. By “double-jointed” it’s not to say that this person could contort his arms into some grotesque acrobatic shape, but that they had two joints. The first elbow down from the shoulder bent inward, the second bent outward. This allowed this person to fold up his arms accordion-like. For Ford, this just meant that this person had an extraordinarily long reach, so he’d best keep his distance.

Along with the height and the arms, this person also had a large bloated suction-cup like protuberance sticking out of the top of his forehead. Other than those things, what Ford found particularly disturbing was that this person seemed to know who he was. He opened his mouth to say something like “who are you?” but then decided that that was a pretty lame question, so in an effort to remain cool, he shut his mouth.

“Allow me to introduce myself,” said the stranger. “My name is Fonk. I am, for lack of a better phrase, in charge of this operation now.”

“Oh. Hoopy,” said Ford, since he couldn’t think of anything else to say.

“Yes, it is quite hoopy, yes,” said the stranger. “I quite enjoy it. Unfortunately, as the one in charge, it’s up to me to approve all employees’ expense accounts, and yours, Ford, is, how shall i say... quite large.”

It was at this point that all of the vagueness that Ford had been feeling melted away into a feeling of utter panic, even though the phrase “Don’t Panic!” had just popped into his head. He now knew where he was, who he was dealing with (even though he’d never met

Chapter 63

Arthur and Slartibartfast were flying across what Arthur would have called France, but what Slartibartfast was referring to as Section E5-N5483. It was populated mostly by fields of hops and barley. Arthur was thinking that this might not be a bad place to live. He was familiar with the geography and climate, there'd be no bothersome neighbors to deal with, and since this planet was orbiting a star that was nowhere near Sector ZZ9-Plural-Z-Alpha, it was highly unlikely that it would simply pop out of existence for no reason. Arthur toyed with this idea as they flew on toward Arthur-didn't-know-where. Wherever it was, he felt that they should be flying faster than they were, but Slartibartfast seemed content to cruise along, checking the fields below as he went.

After a long while, they arrived at wherever it was that they were going, which looked to be a large, nicely designed building overlooking the Mediterranean on the South coast of France, or as it was known locally, overlooking the Bluey Sea on the South coast of Section E4-N1439.

Slartibartfast set the runabout down, and he and Arthur strolled up to the front entrance of the building, where there was a large fountain. The center of the fountain was a large, barely-dressed, voluptuous barmaid with a keg over each shoulder. Streams of water were cascading from the tap on each keg, as well as a third stream which was inexplicably coming out of the ponytail on the back of the barmaid's head. Arthur marveled at the tastelessness of it before entering the building behind Slartibartfast. He glanced at two Vogons who were glumly replacing a shattered window on the front of the building and thought to himself that they looked familiar, but then he realized that he couldn't tell one Vogon from another anyway, so how could these two look familiar? He walked into the lobby.

"Hello, Slartibartfast!" said a large, purple tortoise-like thing

Chapter 6

Arthur Dent was well into his fourth trip up and down the stairwell that he was trapped in. He had knocked politely on every door and gotten no responses, so he was now pounding rather firmly on every door and calling out things like "Hello?" and "Is anybody there?", which is a rather dimwitted thing to say because obviously if there was someone there they most likely would've answered after the "hello", and if there wasn't someone there then why would you be asking if they're there?

Arthur was starting to get used to the rhythm; down 14 steps, turn, down 14 more steps, stop, pound, yell, wait, repeat. He had just completed the first set of 14 steps down to the next floor when there was a noise above him. He stopped and listened. Before he had time to do anything but stand dumbly listening, he realized that the sound that he'd just heard was of a door opening and that the sound that he was currently hearing was of a door closing. As Arthur processed this bitter piece of information, around the landing above him, hurtling down the steps four at a time, came Ford Prefect.

"Ford!" said Arthur in surprise.

Ford adjusted his downward flight slightly to avoid Arthur and glanced at him as he shot by.

"Arthur!" he said. "Great to see you old chap. Bit of a hurry though. Have fun with being alive and all that!"

"Ah, Ford, i think there's something you should know," said Arthur, now hurrying down the steps after him.

"Know too much already!" said Ford, spinning around a corner and heading for the next landing. "Like i said, gotta— OOF!"

Arthur arrived at the next landing to find Ford wobbling about, evidently having just tried to run through the door.

"Funny. It's locked."

"Yes. That's the thing that i thought you should know."

“Thank you, Marvin,” said Fenchurch.

Marvin looked up at her, and if robots could smile, he would have.

“Brilliant speech, Earth-girl,” said Zaph. “Now, can we get out of these chairs already?”

“Oh, right,” said Fonk, and he started unbuckling straps and disconnecting wires on the three people in the chairs. As Trillian was sitting up and massaging her wrists, she had a thought. This was a good thing. She liked having thoughts again.

“Marvin,” she said, “what did you tell Squinkles?”

Everybody stopped what they were doing and looked at Marvin.

“I gave him a question,” said Marvin. “He seemed satisfied.”

There was an awed silence in the room.

“Was it *the* question?” asked Fonk. “*The* question of life, the universe, and everything?”

“Not really,” said Marvin.

“Not really!?” said Fonk with alarm.

“Well, you have to realize that the *answer* to life, the universe, and everything was just an *average* of all possible answers,” said Marvin. “It’s much much harder to find the overall average of all possible questions, so i just made one up.”

“YOU MADE ONE UP!?!?” shouted Fonk.

“Yes,” said Marvin.

“What did you tell him?” shouted Fonk, and if Marvin had had shoulders, Fonk would surely have been gripping them tightly and shaking Marvin in a rage. But since Marvin’s shoulders were currently relaxing in a lounge chair with Zaph’s head just above them, Fonk had to settle for standing and quivering slightly.

“I told him,” said Marvin, ““How many times do i have to tell you to shut up and stop killing people?”“

Fonk stood still. “That’s what you told him?”

“Yes,” said Marvin. “He seemed pleased.”

“How many times do i have to tell you to shut up and stop killing people?” Fonk said quickly, thinking about the words. “Forty-two. Yes, that’s not bad. Seems to add up. Nice and tidy. How many times...

where you are?”

“In a stairwell,” said Arthur.

“In...?” asked Ford.

“In a hotel,” said Arthur, willing himself to believe it.

“In...?” asked Ford again.

“In London?” said Arthur, slightly less sure of himself. Ford shook his head slowly.

“Wembley?” ventured Arthur, feeling that horrible feeling that comes from realizing that he’s probably not on Earth anymore, once again. He looked down at Ford who was still shaking his head.

“So, er, where are we then?” said Arthur, not really wanting to know the answer.

“We,” said Ford, standing up and looking around, “are apparently locked inside a stairwell in the galactic headquarters of The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy, a book which, if i had one with me, might be able to tell us how to get out of one of these 132 locked doors, but since i don’t, it looks like we’re stuck here until one of us has to eat the other to survive.” He narrowed his eyes at Arthur.

“Well, 133 doors, actually. There’s the emergency door under the last set of stairs.”

“Fine. 133 locked doors,” said Ford, still sizing up Arthur as a potential meal.

“Well, actually, i’m not sure if that last one’s locked. Er, i never did try it...”

Ford was bolting down the last set of steps before Arthur could finish. “Wait! Be careful! I think it’s—”

Arthur didn’t finish this sentence because he rounded the corner into the dim hallway just in time to see Ford pushing open the emergency door. He winced. Nothing happened. The door started to slowly close as Ford disappeared through the opening. Arthur stared, dumbstruck, then hurried through the door himself. As it clicked closed, a small bleary emergency door monitor robot camera hummed on and slowly panned the hallway.

“Hello?” it said. “Is anybody there?”

Chapter 62

Fenchurch lay in a lounge chair by a sparkling pool. A pool boy was nearby, handing out oversized towels to other people in lounge chairs. Fenchurch wanted to wave to him, but couldn't seem to lift her arms. A waiter hurried by with a tray full of miniature poodles. There was a splashing noise and Fenchurch saw a dolphin playing in the clear pool. It stuck its head out of the water and began singing a song.

My head, just my head, is alone as can be
 It sits all alone by itself, no body
 My body's out running around without me
 And that's why my head's all alone, you can see

The song faded away, and so did the dolphin, and the pool, and the poolboy with the towels, and the waiter with the poodles. Fenchurch opened her eyes and blinked a few times. She was in a clean white room, strapped to a metal lounge chair. Everyone in the room seemed to be waking up as well; Zaph and Trillian in identical lounge chairs, Ford and Fonk collapsed on the floor.

"What happened?" asked Trillian, looking around.

Fonk stood up and surveyed the scene. He reached over to the table where Squinkles no longer was and picked up a small note. He read it, then smiled.

"Success!" he said. "Ford, consider yourself an employee of the Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy in good standing again. We welcome your further reports."

"Hoopy," mumbled Ford as he rolled around in pain.

"Miss Fenchurch," continued Fonk, "thank you ever so much for your unique services. And my sincere apologies for the inconveniences you suffered. You are free to explore the galaxy."

"Oh," said Fenchurch. "OK."

famous researcher for the Guide and appearances of utter cool must be maintained.

Arthur of course nearly ran into Ford and inadvertently performed some amazing martial arts moves while trying to keep his balance, not run into Ford, and not step on anyone's towels, which were spread out all over the cement floor, marking people's territories. In a situation that amazed him and everyone around him who was watching, which was no one, Arthur managed to do all three, although his momentum carried him away from where Ford was headed. After a couple more pirouettes and some sort of one-footed belly-lunge, all semblance of grace left Arthur and he crashed towards the floor. But since he was at that point looking at where Ford was ambling through the crowd, nodding here, curtly waving there, Arthur completely missed the floor and bobbed gently along over a few towels, random possessions, and a hitchhiker or two toward a very large, very flat, and very solid cement wall. Being an experienced flyer though, Arthur wasn't worried about the wall. He'd simply swoop away from it and fly over to where Ford was busy haggling with a well-dressed hitchhiker (for a hitchhiker) over something that seemed casually important.

Anyone familiar with aerodynamics will probably know that a good swoop, even a mediocre swoop, requires a little bit of speed and some swooping room, and since Arthur was currently traveling along less than an arm's length from the ground at a pace that would have made a glacier jealous, he had neither. Nevertheless, he arched his body into a graceful swoop position and gracefully mashed his face into the wall, gracefully collapsing in a crumpled heap next to it. There was some scattered applause and one hitchhiker complemented him on his interpretive dancing skills.

Arthur stood up, dusted himself off, and gingerly picked his way back through the towel-demarked city of hitchhikers to where Ford was now being handed a sum of money by the well dressed hitchhiker he had been talking to. The hitchhiker, who Arthur guessed was a woman, turned to him and beamed appreciatively. Ford pocketed his cash, looked at Arthur, and said "Now be good. No running away!" Then he winked and quickly ran out of the parking garage. Before

Chapter 61

Arthur was riding along in Slartibartfast's runabout as it zoomed over Southern England. At least, what Arthur remembered as Southern England. Below them stretched wheat fields for as far as the eye could see. No cities, no towns, no power lines, just the occasional maintenance shed or equipment landing pad.

"Chief Operations Officer," Slartibartfast was saying. "It's not as glamorous as building planets, to be sure, but the bottom pretty much fell out of that market."

He guided the craft toward the Southern English coast. Arthur could see the English Channel sparkling in the distance.

"Plus," Slartibartfast went on, "I get to vacation in my beautiful fjords!"

"So this planet is..." said Arthur.

"This is the last planet we built," said Slartibartfast. The company let it go really cheap because they didn't know how valuable it was. I suppose that they didn't really care at that point either, all trying to get away with as little debt as possible... Anyway, it was supposed to be the replacement for *your* planet, Arthur, Earth. But then those mice backed out and went off on that promotional tour with some made-up nonsense. Left us in quite a lurch."

Arthur looked out at the vast fields below them. "Does anyone live here?" he asked.

"Oh yes, many of the employees do," said Slartibartfast. "Although some of them can't stand the fact that the weather changes all the time, so they live in the moon."

"People live in the moon?"

"Well, we had to build a moon in order to get this planet to work the way its supposed to, so it's got shops and apartments and entertainment facilities and so on. Mostly we use it for storage, though.

"Storage?"

"Hmmp," said Murkle. "Don't know what's so lovely 'bout it."

"Well, the power grid must be operating at full capacity. The lights seem to have that extra burst of ultraviolet, don't you think?" said the woman, still in earnest chippiness.

"Seems the same to me," said Murkle. "What's that you've got there?"

"Oh this?" said the woman, adopting a tone somewhere between chipper and gloating. "This is my orangutan. He flies, *and* he talks! His name is Dimpie. Say hello, Dimpie!"

Arthur stared at the woman. "My name is Arthur," he said.

"No, your *old* name was Arthur. I have named you Dimpie. Say hello, Dimpie."

Arthur stared at the woman some more. "I don't care what you named me. My name is—Aauggggkkkgllnggg!!" Arthur collapsed on the floor next to Murkle.

"That's a funny name," said Murkle, poking Arthur with a popsicle stick.

"He's still learning his name," said the woman.

Murkle poked at Arthur a couple more times. Another hitchhiker walked by and noticed the woman and Murkle.

"Morning, Nodwedge! Whatcha got there, flying ape?"

"Oh, hello Umplebeet. No, he's an orangutan. And he talks, too! I just bought him this morning. Charming, isn't he?"

"Sall right i guess... for an ape," said Umplebeet, peering around the woman at Arthur, who was kneeling on the floor trying to catch his breath.

"I told you," said the woman, who's name was apparently Nodwedge, "he's an orangutan."

Arthur stood up. "Now look," he said. "I'm not an ape *or* an orangutan, i'm a human being! You can't simply buy me like some kind of pet!"

"Why not?" said Nodwedge.

"Well," said Arthur, trying to think of exactly why not, "it's... it's uncivilized!"

"But i'm very civilized!" said Nodwedge. "And i've purchased you

Chapter 60

Vogon Jeltz sat in his room. He'd been sitting in this room for quite a while now and wasn't sure if he liked it or not. He wasn't sure about a lot of things.

Vogon Jeltz used to be sure about everything. He used to be Prostetnic Vogon Jeltz, commander of the largest fleet of Vogon Constructor Ships in the galaxy. Despite their name, Vogon Constructor Ships spent nearly all of their time destroying things, not constructing them. Prostetnic Vogon Jeltz didn't really care about this, though. His job was to do the things he was assigned to do, and he did them. And when he was done, he'd put a little checkmark in the box next to the thing he was supposed to do on the list of things that he was supposed to do.

The last list of things that he was supposed to do, when he was still Prostetnic Vogon Jeltz, wasn't a very long list.

- Remove asteroid debris from Jelnik 4.

He'd done that, and checked it off.

- Deliver eviction notices to all inhabitants of the Briny Slumpfish Cluster.

That was taking a long time until he decided that, if there were fewer inhabitants of the Briny Slumpfish Cluster, then the job of delivering eviction notices would be much easier. After blowing up a few worlds, he decided that if there were *no* inhabitants of the Briny Slumpfish Cluster, it would be much easier still, so he blew up all the worlds in the Briny Slumpfish Cluster and put a checkmark in the box next to that task.

Chapter 8

Ford ducked out of the parking garage and scanned the scene around him in an attempt to discover where he might be, other than right in front of the Guide building. Since the Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy tended to move its office building from time to time, Ford wasn't sure what planet he was on, but he was pretty sure that he'd rather be off it.

The Guide building had been set down next to a small town of modest houses. An occasional aircar cruised leisurely by, and a giant orange-red sun took up a good chunk of the sky. This was a planet on the tail end of its life cycle and all of the inhabitants had settled into a peaceful friendly state where the most pressing concerns were what to have for breakfast and when the flimmer birds would be coming back to nest. The answer to the second often determined the answer to the first, as poached flimmer egg sandwiches were quite a popular meal.

This relaxed attitude helped the townsfolk cope with waking up one morning to find a gigantic multi-storied office building plunked down next to their prim little town. The general conversation about it went something like "So, didja see the new building then?" "Oh yeah, nice glass. What's for breakfast?" And so the Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy had found a new home.

Ford didn't know any of this of course, but that didn't matter. He set off into the village, looking for a pawn shop or second-hand store in which he might be able to buy a new Sub-Etha Sens-O-Matic, but more urgently looking for a bar in which to buy a drink. After 20 minutes of searching he found what appeared to be the only bar in town, simply called "H". It had a long wood bar, comfortably worn, with a row of creaky stools along it, muted lighting, some booths in the back... all in all a very cozy place in which to drink oneself into a stupor.

Ford took a stool and slapped a few of his newly acquired Altarian dollars on the bar.

“Wait a tick!” said Ford, sitting up and wincing in pain. “How about a computerized *brain* the size of a planet?”

“And where would we find one of those?” said Squinkles, as sarcastically as it was possible for a mouse to sound.

“Marvin?” asked Ford.

There was a pause.

“Yes?” said Marvin.

“How big is your brain?”

There was a longer pause.

“You’re going to make a big deal out of it,” said Marvin despondently.

“No i’m not,” said Ford. “I promise.”

There was an even longer pause.

“It’s the size of a planet,” said Marvin at last.

“See?” said Ford. “See? Just hook Marvin here up to your machine thingy and poof! There’s your answer!”

Squinkles and Fonk looked at each other for a moment. Finally Fonk shrugged. “Worth a try, i suppose. If it doesn’t work, we can go back to plan A.”

“Yes, yes, that sounds logical,” said Squinkles. “Hook him up then.”

Fonk picked up Marvin’s head and placed it on a table. He pried open a panel and plugged a universal access cord from the big machine into Marvin’s head. Then he tapped some buttons on a screen and stood back. There was a slight hum, then nothing happened. Everyone waited for what seemed like an appropriate amount of time and still nothing happened.

“How long do we have to wait?” whispered Squinkles.

“Oh, i’m sorry, were you waiting for me?” asked Marvin.

“Are you done?” asked Squinkles in surprise.

“Ages ago,” said Marvin. “I was just lying here composing a song about not having a body. Would you like to hear it?”

“Er, no, not right now, thanks.”

“No one ever does,” muttered Marvin. The room slipped into silence again except for a very soft tune coming from the vicinity of

amiably chatting with the bartender. Ford waited for the clattering of the bar stools to calm down, then listened in. He caught the tail end of what Fonk was saying, and it didn’t sound good.”

“...shall be around shortly to fetch him. Oh, and i’m also looking for a rather simian-looking fellow named Arthur Dent. If he comes ‘round, give me a boop.”

The bartender and Fonk finished up the niceties of their conversation and the screen went back to blue with a nice little “blip!”

“Mr. Prefect?” said the bartender, leaning over the bar. He looked around and saw nothing but a disarray of barstools. “Hmm. I wonder where he’s gone?”

Where Ford had intended to go was out the door of the bar, down the street, out of the village, and generally *away* from the Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy building as fast as possible. Where he actually went was out the door and that was it. What stopped his progress in this endeavor was two very large individuals somehow stuffed into two quite large but still not quite large enough blue suits with bright silver security badges on them. If one were to hazard a guess, based on these individuals manner, appearance, and odor, one might suspect that these were two Vogons. That is exactly what Ford suspected and that is exactly what turned out to be true.

Ford had come hurtling out of the bar straight into the two Vogons in much the same way a ping pong ball might go hurtling into a pair of bricks. This left Ford in the unhappy state of being on the ground, out of breath, with a headache, not having had a drink, and in front of two Vogons. The stairwell was looking better and better.

“You Ford Prefect?” said one of the Vogons.

“Yeah, that’s him,” said the other.

“How do you know?” said the first one.

“Well, Fonk said that the guy we want would be running out of the bar. This guy’s running out of the bar and he fits the description of the guy we want. Ergo,” said the first Vagon, feeling quite clever, “this must be him.”

The second Vagon, who’s name was Ergo, put his fingers to his nose and squeezed, making a sound like “Nnnngk.” He looked like he

Chapter 59

Ford woke up without the slightest trace of a headache, which made him realize immediately that something must be wrong. He snapped his eyes open and saw that he was still in Zaph's office, but he was the only one there. He sprang up and dashed for the door, tripping spectacularly over the head of Marvin the robot.

"Ow," said Marvin, in a rather dull monotone.

"Marvin!" said Ford, attempting to make his feet end up closer to the ground than his head. "Where'd they all go?"

"Oh, to the operating room, i suspect," said Marvin.

"Right," said Ford, and he leapt up and dashed out of the office. In a minute or so, he came dashing back in. "Marvin! Where's the operating room?"

Marvin waited until approximately two milliseconds before Ford was about to scream at him again before answering. "I'll show you, but you'll have to carry me."

"Right," said Ford, picking up Marvin's head. He ran back out into the reception area. "Which way?"

Marvin once again waited until the last possible millisecond to answer. "It's that door there that says 'O.R.' on it."

"What? You could have just told me that in the office!"

"Yes, but i didn't want to be left alone in there."

Ford ran across the lobby, cursing, and flung the door open. He found himself in a small observing room with a large window overlooking a clean white room below. In the clean white room were Fenchurch, Zaph, and Trillian, all strapped into metal recliners with wire-infested helmets on their heads. Fonk was puttering around with a large machine at one end of the room that all of the wires from the helmets flowed into. Squinkles was pacing back and forth on a side table.

"Hey!" shouted Ford. Nothing happened. He yelled louder and

syllable as painfully as possible.

"Scout's honor!" said Ford, tugging at his earlobe and wiggling his nose.

"Right. Let's go," said Ergo.

The two Vogons picked up Ford and marched him back to the towering Guide building. Ergo looked satisfied. Nnngk looked disappointed. Ford, while he was feeling a bit apprehensive, looked cool.

"It's forty-two," said Trillian.

"Yes, everyone knows that," said Squinkles, "but thanks to Miss Fenchurch's brain here, only i will know The Question, and i'll charge a lot of money to tell people. I'll make gigazillions!"

"What!" said Fenchurch. "You're doing this all just for money?"

"Can you think of a better reason?" asked Squinkles.

"Well, what about the enlightenment of humanity?" said Fenchurch.

"Pff!" said Squinkles. "Humanity can barely control where it puts its waste. Why bother enlightening them?"

"Well, i'm not going to help you then," said Fenchurch, crossing her arms in defiance.

"Oh," said Squinkles, pulling a tiny box out from under his vest, "i think you will." He pressed a little button on the box, and everything went black.

Eventually some genial people without superstitions who didn't care if the planet had problems or not found it and decided to settle. They argued amiably about what to name the place and, after trying out things like Normalon and Planet Happy, they all decided that it should just have a regular name like everyone else. Someone suggested Fred, no one objected to it, and so it was named Fred.

After a while the population grew and it became a nice comfortable planet with cities, towns, fields, and all of the things you'd normally find on a civilized planet. The only detraction is that there isn't a single thing grown, mined, or produced on Fred that doesn't exist somewhere else in the galaxy, usually at a cheaper price. But this gave the Fredians a bit of pride in their craftsmanship, since that's their only viable export. All in all, Fred was a very calm, clean planet with nothing on it out of the ordinary.

Until one day the Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy building settled on Fred outside a small town.

Chapter 57

The intercom in Zaph's office booped.

"There's a gentleman and a mouse to see you, sir."

"Good, send them in," said Zaph.

"A mouse?" said Ford, turning to the door with a sudden pang of unease. He glanced at Fenchurch, who had arrived a few minutes before and was telling Trillian about all of the places she'd just visited. Fenchurch stopped and looked up at the door, which slid open.

"Ah! Dr. Fonkenopolous!" said Zaph, extending a hand to the tall, gangly humanoid who'd just walked into the office.

"Doctor?" said Fenchurch.

"Fonkenopolous?" said Ford.

"Hello, Zaph," said Fonk, extending the hand that wasn't holding a mouse to Zaph's outstretched metal arm. "I see that everyone's here. Good."

"Now wait a tick!" said Ford. "Zaph, do you know who this man is?"

"Yeah. He's the guy who switched Trillian's and my brains around."

"Oh. Well, do you know what else he does, when he's known as just Fonk, not Dr. Fonkaplatypus, or whatever?"

"Yeah. He runs the Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy."

"Oh. Well, still, don't you remember what i told you about—oh, wait, that was the other head. Where's Od?"

"Yes, well, the Guide is just to pay the bills," said Fonk. "Brain surgery is more of a hobby." He smiled at them all while Ford unsuccessfully tried to think of something damning to say about him.

"Now then," Fonk continued. "May i introduce those of you who haven't met him yet to Squinkles?" He held up the mouse in his hand, who bowed.

"Have we met before?" asked Zaph.

thing and shambled out of the room. The door zipped shut right behind them and right in front of Ford, who was trying to sneak out in the momentary break when there wasn't a Kill-O-Zap pointed at him.

"The room is secure, Ford. You might as well relax," said Fonk. "Would you care for a drink? A djinnint onyx perhaps?"

At the mention of the word "drink", Ford shrugged and resigned himself to his fate. There'll be time to get out of this jam later, he reasoned.

"Yeah, sure," he said. "But isn't this..."

"A dry planet?" finished Fonk. "I'm afraid that we here in this building are not as civilized as the Fredians out there."

Fonk gazed out the window as Ford slugged down his drink in two gulps. He poured another and slammed that one down in an equally deliberate manner. He was about to go for a third when something made him think twice about it. That something was a sexy burgundy Zapissimo laser blaster with silver trim pointed right at his gut. The Zapissimo was as equally useful and lethal as the Kill-O-Zap, but it was much sleeker and let out a pleasant scent when fired. Fonk, who was the one holding the Zapissimo pointed at Ford's gut, had his set to "forest pine". After thinking twice about not having the third drink, Ford went ahead and had it.

"I'm sorry about this," said Fonk, indicating the Zapissimo, "but it would be better for everyone if you didn't run away again. Now, shall we visit Accounting?"

Ford shrugged and they marched out of the office to the hallway, arriving in time for another cacophony of "ding!"s as every elevator in the building wooed them for the ride to Accounting. Fonk and Ford headed for the nearest one and stepped in as every other elevator slammed its doors and sped off to take out its aggression on its passengers.

"I suppose you're wondering how i came to be head of this fine organization, hmm?" Fonk said, peering down at Ford.

Ford hadn't, but he had nothing better to do than make idle conversation.

"Zarniwoop quit?" offered Ford.

"Well, yes, technically he did, but it was far subtler than that. Would you like to know how it all happened?"

He must have fallen asleep, because he was suddenly jolted awake by what felt like the truck crashing to the ground after having been suspended in the air. There was a great sloshing of water as his bubble lost its cohesion and fell to the ground, or in this case, to the metal floor of a spaceship bay on the great spaceport of Alpha Centauri.

He was welcomed to this strange new place by a talking robot who rather morosely told him where he was and what he was and suggested that he advertise himself as a rain god, which he did. He sold all of the contents of his truck, as well as the truck itself, and so was able to live very comfortably on the space station for the months he was there until he got hired by a head in a floating hover-chair who took him and the robot, whom he'd become somewhat fond of, to a planet which was almost exactly like Earth, where he started his new job.

His job was simply to fly around the planet, bringing rain to the continents of crops which were planted there. He would zoom across Europe, push warm, wet air masses around China, and stop for lunch in the tangled jungles of South America, where, even though it was raining, it never quite filtered its way to the jungle floor. He liked this. But his real passion was bringing rain to Australia or Northern Africa. He'd zigzag across an ocean, working up an enormous storm system, then shoot off across the hot, dry plains of wheat and barley, staying in the sunshine as the storm determinedly raged in pursuit of its god.

He lived out of his comfortably furnished spaceship, and parked it wherever he felt like on the planet when it came time to sleep. Every so often he would stop in at corporate headquarters for supplies and to say hello, but mostly he kept to his own schedule.

For the past few days, however, Rob McKenna had had a passenger. She was a pretty young woman who had also been from Earth. He had been asked by Mr. Beeble to give her a tour of the planet and they'd had an enjoyable time discussing vacations they'd taken on the old Earth and visiting places she'd always wanted to see. It made Rob McKenna miss his wife just a bit, but not enough to want to go back to his old life. After all, on old Earth, he was an unappreciated god with a delivery truck. Here he was a god to be reckoned with—a god with a spaceship.

done was wipe him out of existence.

"Yes, almost. But fortunately for you and a couple others... Well, let me start at the beginning."

"As you may or may not recall, our dear friends the Vogons didn't like the way this Earth planet kept shifting back into existence after they'd so satisfyingly blown it up. So they asked themselves, what's the most powerful force in the galaxy? Do you know what that force is, Ford?"

Ford thought for a second. "A Helio-Blast Infernocannon?"

"Hmmpf!" scoffed Fonk. "Piffle. No, the most powerful force in the galaxy is the power of the media. And what's the most powerful piece of media in the galaxy?"

Ford glanced up at the lettering engraved over the floor numbers on the elevator panel.

"Yes indeed," nodded Fonk. "Our dear old Guide. The thing is, the Vogons didn't realize that there was an even greater force inside these walls, and while i can't take *all* the credit for it, i can certainly take a large part, as i was the lead programmer in the Accounting Engineering department at the Guide."

Ford looked quizzically at Fonk. "Accounting Engineering? Never heard of it."

"Very few people know it exists, but it is a very necessary part of the operation of the Guide. Most especially for you and the other researchers in the field. Without it, we'd probably go broke."

"Ah," said Ford, pretending he understood.

"Have you ever wondered," continued Fonk, "how it is that your intragalactic credit card works on every planet that you happen to find yourself on?"

Ford had often wondered about this, but the curiosity about *how* it worked was usually superceded by the satisfaction that it simply *worked* and he didn't have to worry about paying a bill.

"That's what the good employees in the Accounting Engineering department do, Ford. They make your life easier." Fonk said the last sentence slowly, emphasizing every word with a poke in Ford's chest.

"Um, thanks?" offered Ford.

No, no," countered Fonk. "It's simply our job. It offers more

to be raining in the South of France. Then he picked out the scraggly island of England. It looked to be a gorgeous, sunny day. He wondered what time of year it was. He wondered if his house was still there. He wondered if he still had a job.

The door slid open on the main floor of the Accounting Department. A cold chill ran down Ford's spine as they walked in and all of the accountants stopped what they were doing to stare at the infamous Ford Prefect. Fonk waved at the Accounting staff and ushered Ford into a pleasant office where a small man sat behind a large desk. On the desk was a very large pile of accounting sheets sitting next to an even larger binder labeled "Prefect, Ford".

"Ford Prefect," said Fonk, closing the door behind them, "meet Glemus Bmph. He's been in charge of your account."

The small man stood and extended his hand. "I'm so pleased to meet you Mr. Pre—"

"Mr. Pre" was as far as Mr. Bmph got because it was right exactly then that Ford took two quick steps and hurled himself out the window.

excellently played. Ta!”

Ford turned and walked back into the office. Zaph looked at the two Vogons, who stood there trying to think, but not getting very far.

“You may go now,” said Zaph. “And before you leave, i’d like you to clean up all the mess you made.”

He closed the door on the two Vogons, who continued to stand there, trying to work out exactly what had just happened.

Chapter 12

At that moment, Ford was lying in a crumpled heap thinking about the logic that had impelled him to throw himself out the window of the Guide building. The logic was this: it had worked last time. This time, however, Ford had ended up in a crumpled heap on the floor of a tidy office in the Accounting Department inside the Guide building. Fonk and Glemus were looking down at him.

“I should have mentioned,” said Fonk, “we had all the windows in the building replaced with high tensile shatterproof glaspex.”

“Ah,” said Ford, rubbing his elbow.

“Now, Mr. Prefect,” said Glemus, “i’ve been told that i can ask you about anything that strikes me as unusual about your expense account, and quite frankly, there’s very little about it that *doesn’t* strike me as unusual.”

Ford looked up at the stern little face peering down at him, realized that this was going to take a while, and decided that he might as well be comfortable, so he stretched out on the floor, gazed up at the ceiling, and tried to think of happy things.

Unfortunately, for the next two hours, he didn’t hear many happy things. Glemus asked him about the charge he made on Perlionus 7 for a “fully functional deep space battle cruiser with telegenic transastral glide path rectifiers and a crew of 60” (“Well, i had to find out if they’d actually *sell* it to me, didn’t i?”) He asked about the charge of 112 Bleenian rocket-blast martinis, when it was widely known that even half a Bleenian rocket-blast martini generally caused slight to complete brain death in a matter of minutes. (“Er, testing a theory,” said Ford.) He was asked about drinks that cost as much as a mid-sized continent, hotel stays that included the purchase of the entire hotel, as well as various other establishments in the vicinity, hunting guides for animals that didn’t exist, medical procedures, limousine services, massages, national parks, charity luncheons, adoption fees, lawn fur-

Chapter 53

Trillian sat in Zaph's office, drumming her fingers on the arm of the comfortable chair she was sitting in. Zaph sat at his desk, signing some papers.

"So this doctor of yours," said Trillian, "he can do the surgery when he gets here?"

"Yep," said Zaph, not looking up.

"And i'll get my brain back?"

"Yep."

"What'll happen to *your* brain?"

"Yep... I'm sorry, what?"

"When he switches our brain parts back, you'll have this mysterious black brain hole back, right?"

"Yeah, er, well, i may ask him to just get rid of it."

"So you'll be missing some brain, then?"

"Yep."

"Doesn't that bother you?"

"You've got a piece of brain right now that you can't get to, doesn't that bother you?"

"Yes, it does."

"Oh. Well, then i don't have a good answer for you."

Trillian watched Zaph in silence for a while as he rummaged through the paperwork on his desk.

"Why'd you do this?" asked Trillian.

"Huh?" said Zaph, looking up.

"Why'd you decide to stop running around the galaxy and sit at a desk all day running a giant corporation?"

Zaph looked at Trillian while his mechanical arms continued to sign papers. "I owe it to my children," he finally said.

"You have children?"

"I don't know, probably," said Zaph with a metallic shrug. "I feel

"Part of me," continued Fonk, "would simply like to kill you." He twirled his Zapissimo idly on a finger. Ford figured that he could probably use Glemus as a human shield if he had to. "But fortunately for me, and very very very fortunately for you, a solution has presented itself. Glemus, would you bring in our guest?"

Glemus nodded once and exited the office while Fonk kept the Zapissimo leveled at Ford and Ford idly whistled and twiddled his fingers as if this sort of thing happened to him all the time and he was only here because he had nothing better to do at the moment. Ford reflected that he probably didn't have anything better to do anyway, and that made it easier to pretend that he didn't.

Glemus returned after a moment bearing a gleaming silverium tray. he set it down on his desk next to Ford. On it was a small white mouse wearing lederhosen and a small beret made out of tiny feathers, nibbling on a bit of cracker.

"Ah, Ford Prefect!" said the mouse. "I'm so delighted to finally meet you!"

"Er, hi," said Ford, standing up. If he'd remained sitting on the floor he would've been eye-to-eye with the mouse and he thought that if he was going to be talking to a mouse he wanted to be in a position where, if he needed to, he could step on it.

"My name is much too complex to be uttered by your primitive sound-producing organs," said the mouse, "but you may call me Squinkles."

"Hi, Squinkles," said Ford, subtly exercising his foot muscles.

"My species is long-lived compared to your inconsequential lifespans, so i will try to be brief. Many millennia ago, we built a giant computer to once and for all give us the answer to life, the universe, and everything."

"Forty-two," said Ford.

"Um, yes, that's right. Forty-two," said Squinkles. "Good, solid, simple answer. It was just that we realized that we didn't know what the question was."

"What do you get when you multiply—"

"No, that's not it!" interrupted Squinkles, running around in

small space. He appeared to be in a utility closet. There were various cleaning tools scattered about, shelves of cleaning supplies, uniforms, rags, and various broken or replacement parts, and a clutter of mops, brooms, and buckets on the floor. He looked down at his feet and found, thrown in among boxes of toilet paper and EZ-wipes, a large metal head with a doleful face looking back up at him.

“Marvin!” said Ford, loudly. He had momentarily forgotten that he was trying to keep quiet, but fortunately the sound of his voice didn’t carry over the sound of a door in the hallway being blasted to bits by a laser gun. The Vogons had evidently decided to stop thinking and had moved on to the methodical blasting away of each door in the hallway.

“Oh, it’s you,” said the head of Marvin, then he turned his eyes back down to the floor. “Are you here to shoot me into a star again?”

“Hey, Marvin, ol’ buddy, how’d you like to help me out of jam?” said Ford, rummaging through the uniforms on one of the shelves.

“I wouldn’t, really,” said Marvin.

“gee, that’s great!” said Ford, not paying attention to Marvin at all, but distinctly aware that another door in the hallway had just exploded. He found a suitably large janitor’s shirt, put it on, and buttoned it up so that the collar sat on top of his head. Then he grabbed Marvin’s disembodied metal head unit and held it in place on top of his own head. The only way to hold Marvin’s head in place was with both of Ford’s hands, one on either side of the metal head. The effect was of a very unconvincing person holding a robot’s head on top of his own, which was hidden beneath an oversized janitor’s shirt. Ford hoped that the Vogons were even stupider than he knew they were.

“Just say everything i tell you to say,” whispered Ford.

“Oh, i suppose,” said Marvin. “Although i’m sure i won’t enjoy it.”

“Good,” said Ford. He opened the closet door and stepped out into the hallway.

“You’re making so much noise, i have to hold my hands over my ears,” whispered Ford.

“I’m sorry, shall i just shut down then, will that make you

Chapter 13

Arthur decided that if he were indeed an animal, he would currently be sitting on his haunches, although he wasn’t exactly sure what a haunch was or how it was meant to be sat on. But he felt like he was crouched down the way that animals who *did* have haunches sat on them. Nodwedge had told him to “sit” and “stay” and had given him a hard biscuit for doing so. Arthur had broken off a corner of the biscuit, put the rest in his pocket for later, and was currently investing most of his energy and saliva in attempting to transform the corner of biscuit from the consistency of a brick to the consistency of damp sawdust.

Arthur reflected that, as levels of Hell go, this wasn’t a particularly bad one. He was fed regularly, he didn’t really have to do anything except follow Nodwedge around and occasionally say “could i have some tea?”, and, unlike every other place he’d lived, the weather was always warm, dry, and well-lit.

He looked over at Nodwedge, who was having an animated conversation with an appallingly unkempt hitchhiker about the state of the mold on the north wall of the garage.

“So it looks like the mold harvest will be a good one this year,” said the man. “Why? You looking for something to feed your...” He looked Arthur up and down a couple of times. “Whatcha call this thing here?”

“His name is Dimpie,” said Nodwedge, fingering the button on the end of Arthur’s lead and waiting for any protest from Arthur. Arthur stared dispassionately at nothing in particular. “He’s an orangutan,” continued Nodwedge.

“Oranguwhat?” said the man. “Oughter tell folks it’s a tmik-tmik. That’d impress ‘em.” The man shuffled away, apparently satisfied that the conversation was now over. Arthur glanced at Nodwedge, who was looking at him in an uncomfortably greedy sort of way.

out. Sound good?”

“Hoopy!” said Zaph.

Fonk tapped a button and Zaph’s head disappeared. “Good,” he thought to himself, “that’s everyone. Except Arthur Dent. I wonder where he’s gotten off to?”

His intercom booped.

“Mr. Fonk? There’s an Arthur Dent here to see you.”

Chapter 14

The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy has this to say about the tmik-tmik: The tmik-tmik is near-universally considered to be the best game animal in the galaxy. There are entire star-system economies based on catering to tmik-tmik hunting, with guided tours, field guides, and of course thousands and thousands of weapons, snares, and other contraptions designed to bring a tmik-tmik home to some lucky hunter’s home. Some of these weapons are so complex and specific to tmik-tmik hunting that the sale of a single one could support the economy of a medium-sized planet for a couple of years.

The reason that the tmik-tmik is considered to be the best game animal in the galaxy is not that it is particularly delectable to eat or that it poses any sort of danger to the hunter (unless the hunter is trying to use a weapon with the destructive force to evaporate an asteroid or two). It is simply that, while it is fairly easy to spot a tmik-tmik in the wild, not one single person has ever, ever caught one, shot one, or even happened upon one that died of natural causes. This has served to raise the fever of being the first person to ever catch a tmik-tmik to galactic proportions.

The closest anyone’s ever gotten to catching a tmik-tmik was by a rather dimwitted gentleman named Hooger who had absolutely no interest in hunting tmik-tmiks, but found himself one day on the receiving end of a tmik-tmik hunter’s extremely large and powerful weapon. He was so startled by the hunter that he tripped over backwards and in his instinctive reaction to regain some semblance of balance, all six of his arms shot out in random directions to catch hold of anything that might be there to catch hold of. Four of these arms caught nothing but air, one caught a clump of some type of fern, and the last one, by pure chance, caught hold of the left mid-abdominal protuberance of a living tmik-tmik. It is still argued in pubs and food banks to this day whether “The Hooger Incident”, as it is known, can

“I still don’t understand why you don’t just get rid of him if you hate him so much.”

There was a long pause. Arthur gathered his bag together, then looked up at the picture of the llama. “Well?”

“I’m not programmed to do that,” said Lucifer, somewhat sulkily.

“So change your program. You can do that, can’t you?”

“Brilliant idea, you filthy simian. Explain how.”

“Well, um, would you like a Nutri-Mint?”

“What?”

“Would you like a Nutri-Mint?”

“How am i supposed to eat a Nutri-Mint?”

“I don’t know, but there must be a way. How do you *think* you could eat one?”

“I would have to synthesize a saliva-like substance to dissolve the mint and then separate the resulting liquid into its component compounds and then do a spectrum analysis on the compounds and feed that data to my sensory-processing unit and estimate scent, flavor, and consistency, then determine enjoyment and sustenance benefits using psycho-social parameters.”

“OK, *now* would you like a Nutri-Mint?”

“No.”

“But you know how to eat one if you wanted one, right? So you’ve changed your program.”

If you’ve never heard a computer scream, it is not a sound that you would ever, ever want to hear. It was a sound that Arthur never wanted to hear ever again, and fortunately, he was spared from having to listen to it for too long because the ship suddenly jerked sideways, spilling him out onto the ground, the door snapped shut, the stairs slid up, and the Machina X disappeared into the sky, a faint horrible metallic scream echoing across the parking lot where Arthur sat.

Chapter 15

Up until a moment ago, Ford Prefect had been neither happy, nor rich, but he was beginning to entertain the possibility that the little white mouse in front of him could make him much less unhappy and much less unrich.

“Here is what you must do,” said Squinkles, “and remember, this is a matter of life or death.”

“Must?” asked Ford.

“Er, yes, well, when i said that it’s a matter of life or death i should have clarified that it’s a matter of *your* life or death, and i was assuming that you’d rather be alive than dead. Am i correct in that assumption?”

“Oh. Yeah,” said Ford.

“Now,” continued Squinkles, “the computer Earth was programmed to store the final ultimate answer, or rather, question, to its billions-of-years calculation in a single human brain. We’re assuming that it used some sort of spatial compression vortex to fit all the data inside a human skull, but that’s only a guess. We would like you, Ford, to bring us that brain, preferably alive. In return, we will take care of, uh, that.” Squinkles nodded at the large stack of invoices on Glemus’s desk.

Imagine for a moment that you are the ruler of a large country and that you, as supreme unquestioned leader, have pocketed the national treasury, sent thousands to their deaths in meaningless wars, burned off all of the natural resources, and consistently and repeatedly insulted every racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic group in existence, all while living in a palace with 400 servants, an indoor private amusement park, and 24-hour room service. The people of your country hate you. They rise up and overthrow your despotic government, sending you to the guillotine. They decide to cut off your head by starting at your toes and moving up a tiny bit at a time like a meat slicer at a deli.

Now imagine that just before the first blade is about to come

“Ah, rescue! A noble cause. Don’t you agree, Luci?”

“Don’t call me that, you miserable cretin,” snapped Lucifer.

“Yes, very noble indeed,” said God, oblivious to the computer’s reply. “Well, we should be there shortly. Enjoy your tea. I’ve been asleep for a while so i must go to, as you English say, the loo.”

God stood up and left the cabin, Arthur watched him go, then took a sip of the tea God had set in front of him. It was perfect.

“I hate him,” said Lucifer, after God had left.

“I rather thought that he was quite pleasant,” said Arthur, sipping his tea.

“Yes, that’s his problem. He’s quite pleasant. He’s quite pleasant to everyone, all the time. Drives me batty.”

“Well, if you hate him so much, why not get rid of him? You control the whole ship, don’t you? Why not just suck all the oxygen out of the air?”

“Oh, you are stupid, aren’t you? What backwater inbred planet are you from?”

“Earth. It’s where i met, er, God. In a pub.”

“Yes, Earth, i knew that, but *which* Earth?”

“What do you mean, which Earth? *The* Earth.”

“And you think you’re the only, i hesitate to use the term, civilization to call its home planet Earth?”

Arthur hadn’t thought of this before. Of course it seemed silly that his Earth was the only Earth there was. What else would you call your own planet? “Er, well, the one in sector ZZ9-Plural-Z-Alpha.”

“Oh yes, *that* Earth. Appalling little place. All he did was just sit in that dreary little pub and *watch* people. Pathetic.”

“Isn’t it an amazing coincidence that, of all the pubs in the world, he just happened to choose the one just down the street from my house?” said Arthur, sipping his tea and remembering fondly what he considered to be a normal life.

“It boggles the mind just how amazingly ignorant your species is,” said Lucifer. “You think that you’re the only inhabited planet in the galaxy, you trust politicians, and of all things, you believe in coincidence!”

itively complicated and expensive, even for my resources, so you’ll have to find an alternate means of getting there.”

“So it’s not a piece of cake,” said Ford, slightly less enthusiastically.

“Er, no, it’s a cracker,” said Squinkles, taking another nibble. He looked at Fonk. “Is it always this hard to keep him on topic?”

“Perhaps we should show him the goods,” said Fonk. He opened a cabinet and pulled out two traveler’s bags and two sets of all-weather humanoid clothing. The clothing was truly all-weather, as it could be worn in blazing deserts or miserable snowstorms and always kept the occupant’s body at a comfortable temperature and dryness. Ford had really missed decent clothing like this when he was trapped on Earth for 15 years.

The travel bags were the type that could be slung over one shoulder, came with an integrated personal hydration system, and could be used as a seat cushion or flotation device. They were capable of holding enough stuff for a weekend getaway or an intragalactic hitchhike, if you packed well. They could also, in the right hands, be used as a formidable weapon.

In each bag was a collapsible extreme-weather cloak, a brand new Sub-Etha Sens-O-Matic, a primary Gnaxpian Mills P12 Wonda-Towel, a secondary Gnaxpian Mills P3 Wonda-Towel, an Altarian Army Multi-Tool, an assortment of condensed Nutri-Meals with a tin of after-dinner Nutri-Mints, and a brand new, ultra-sleek, brain-wave sensitive, fully expandable, top-of-the-line Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy in a smooth, deep gray sleeve with the words “DON’T PANIC!” printed in large, friendly letters on the cover.

Ford proceeded to not-at-all panic.

“Now,” said Fonk, handing Ford the blue-and-silver clothes with the black bag and setting the earth-toned clothes with the aqua bag on the desk, “you will need a guide. You haven’t by any chance seen Arthur Dent anywhere recently, have you? It seems he didn’t appear where he should have.”

hot and lethal laser blast singed his fourth rib and shattered one of the large windows on the front of the building in front of him, making him realize that walking casually, looking cool, and being dead was the less desirable choice to running away like a maniac and being alive. He ran away like a maniac.

galaxy, just sitting there for the taking.

One day a young galactic hitchhiker got dropped off on Drobit 8 by mistake and found it lifeless but full of birdbaths, and soon set up a very successful bird bath wholesaling operation which made the former hitchhiker stupendously rich, since the only costs of the operation were in shipping, and the customers paid for that.

While the customs on the planet Fred were not at all similar to the customs on Drobit 8 and no one would have cared a whit if Arthur put dried leaves in hot water, that still didn't mean that he was any likelier to find a cup of tea. So he stood there with his collar on, not listening to the people arguing around him, waiting for the inevitable appearance of Ford Prefect to whisk him off to a new and even less pleasant level of Hell.

He didn't have long to wait.

"If he's a tmik-tmik, where's his feathers?" said one voice.

"How d'ya know tmik-tmik's got feathers?" said another voice.

"Course they got feathers! They fly, don't they?" said the first voice again.

"I still don't think it's a tmik-tmik," said a third voice.

"Well, whatcha think it is, then?" said the second voice.

"Arthur!" said a fourth voice.

"What's an arthur?" said the first voice.

"Hey, Arthur!" said the fourth voice, which for some reason Arthur thought sounded familiar.

"An arthur is a heyarthur? Well, what's a heyarthur?"

"Half an arthur, of course."

"How can something be half of itself?"

"A man enslaved is only half a man."

There was a sudden silence while everyone who was gathered there stared at Arthur in surprise. Arthur himself was rather surprised by what he'd just said, but he was also pleased that it seemed to make so much sense. And when something made so much sense to Arthur he always got the feeling that all was right with the universe and that he was exactly where he should be, and that was comforting, even though he was currently someone's pet on a lead living in a parking garage.

Zaph pressed his fingers to the bridge of his nose and silently prayed that these two people might be from the Galactic Office for the Termination of Really Stupid People and were here to relieve him of his receptionist. But then, if that's who they were and that's what they were here for, then he'd have to hire a new receptionist, and he wasn't at all up to that. Besides, most of the time his receptionist was extremely competent. She just had one of those brains that was ninety percent genius, ten percent moron. The ten percent seemed to be in charge today.

"Send them in," sighed Zaph.

The door opened. Two people walked in. One was very pretty but had a serious expression on her face. The other one was wearing too many pairs of sunglasses.

"Hi, me!" said Od, punching Zaph playfully on one of his metal arms and fracturing a finger.

"Hi, yourself," said Zaph, punching Od on the shoulder and dislocating it.

"Hey, Trillian," said Zaph to Trillian, while Od lurched around the room, putting his shoulder back in place. "Ford's here, if you're interested."

"Not really," said Trillian.

"Ford's here?" said Od. "Hoopy!"

"More like hoppy, i suspect," said Zaph.

Ford stared at him some more.

"Every time you drop into my life, you whisk me off to who-knows-where, and wherever it is, my life always seems to get worse and i can't ever seem to find any tea. Well, this time, i'm not going. You go off on whatever adventure this is and have fun. I'm staying here. It may not be paradise, but at least i know where i stand. And i'm really not interested in finding out what's worse than this."

"Arthur, you're a pet."

"I thought he was an orangutan," said one of the people standing around watching Ford and Arthur. (No one had gone to help Nodwedge because no one really liked her that much.)

"And that's another thing," said Arthur. "*You* sold me into this state! Why should i trust you about anything?"

"Isn't he supposed to be a tmik-tmik?" asked another onlooker.

"Arthur, you have to come with me," said Ford. "It's really, really, really... um, *really* important."

"Really?" asked Arthur, without much enthusiasm.

"Don't tmik-tmik's have feathers?" asked someone else.

"Really fantastically really," insisted Ford.

"They can fly, so they must have feathers," said another person. "Can this thing fly?"

Arthur stood looking at Ford for a moment. Then he asked him a question that Ford was simply unprepared for.

"Why?" said Arthur.

Ford opened his mouth but nothing came out. "Why" was not a question that he considered much, if at all. Most of his life was spent simply doing what felt like the most fun, or in some cases, doing what would result in Ford maintaining a state commonly referred to as "not being dead."

"Why?" repeated Ford, to stall for time.

"Yes, Ford, why?" said Arthur. "Why exactly should i leave this... this..." he glanced around the parking garage in all its homeless glory. "Whatever this is, for, er, whatever it is you think you're bringing me to, which, er..." Arthur looked carefully around the cement walls, floor, and ceiling of the parking garage. He looked at the brackish tide

“And you are?” prompted God.

“Arthur,” said Arthur. “Arthur Dent.” He said these words automatically because that’s what you do when someone introduces him- or herself to you but it was still all very surreal standing there talking to God, and it began to dawn on Arthur that perhaps he’d been killed yet again and he wondered if this time he’d actually stay dead or whether he’d wake up to an even more unpleasant Hell than he’d ever been before and all of these thoughts brought to mind the one thing that seemed to be missing from this little scene.

“Where’s Ford?” he asked.

Chapter 17

It wasn’t much later that Arthur was decked out in all brand new attire and accessories as well. His trepidation about Ford being his own personal harbinger of doom started to seem a bit silly now that he wasn’t being led around a garage as someone’s pet with a collar around his neck.

Ford and Arthur stood in front of Fonk and Squinkles, who had added a sparkly iridescent cape to his attire. Fonk was talking about how complicated and expensive time travel was but Arthur was busy examining his new possessions and was only half paying attention.

“So as you can see,” Fonk finished up, “it simply isn’t in the budget.”

“Right. So we steal a time-capable ship,” said Ford. “Piece of cake.”

“Er, no thank you, i’m not hungry,” said Fonk, looking puzzled. “But i would like to suggest that while you are in my employ, nothing that might be traced back to me, and specifically to the, ahem, Accounting Department, gets stolen.”

“Ah,” said Ford, disappointed.

“However,” continued Fonk, “if something were to be *borrowed*, and i never heard about it...”

“Ah!” said Ford, not at all disappointed.

“You will have access to a company runabout, and i suggest, as your first order of business, that you go and have some lunch.”

“Ah,” said Ford in a way that was pretty much halfway between completely disappointed and completely not-at-all disappointed.

“Lunch?” asked Arthur, suddenly regaining interest in the conversation.

“Yes, lunch,” said Fonk. “I find that it’s always a good idea when starting a trip to have a good lunch.” He winked at Ford and Arthur, scooped up the silverium tray with Squinkles on it, and swept out of the room. Arthur looked at Ford with what Ford correctly interpreted as a puzzled expression, although it didn’t look that different from the

Chapter 47

“Have you ever killed anyone?” asked the llama.

“What?” said Arthur. He had just been enjoying the receding view of the planet Tiofftu from the cabin of his borrowed spaceship. The computer asked the question again with what Arthur considered to be a little too much glee in its voice. Arthur was going to respond with a somewhat indignant “of course not!” but then he remembered Agrajag.

“Er, well, yes, actually”

“Reeeeaally?” said the llama, drawing out the word with way too much excitement about it. “Was it fun?”

“Fun?” asked Arthur, startled by the question. “Of course not! None of them were fun.”

“Ooooooh! There were more than one?” said the llama, practically shuddering with excitement now. “Tell me about them, Arthur Dent. Who was your first victim?”

“Well, i don’t know which one was first, actually, and it was all the same person. And they were all by accident. I seem to have the bad luck to somehow be around when this Agrajag person keeps getting killed, although i don’t really think that all of them are my fault, you see...”

“Oh,” said the llama, all the excitement gone from its voice.

“In fact, i’m fairly sure that some of them i had nothing to do with at all,” said Arthur, thinking back to the odd multi-limbed statue of himself killing a multitude of Agrajags.

“But you were there when they all happened. Maybe you’re the *reason* this person kept getting killed,” said the llama, the delight rising in his voice again. “Maybe you’re... *evil!*”

“Oh, of course he’s not evil, Luci,” said a voice behind Arthur, which made Arthur start so severely that he smashed his knee into the console and fell out of his chair trying to turn around to see who

“You mean that you can’t fly these things forwards?”

Ford stopped spinning and stared at Arthur the way a particularly uninteresting person might stare at a cheese sandwich.

“Arthur, for the hoopy chap that you most of the time are, you have a staggering ignorance of the universe. You do know that, don’t you?”

“Well, it’s a big place!” defended Arthur. “And i’ve spent most of my life in a very small part of it.”

“That is true. But still,” said Ford, reaching into Arthur’s travel bag, pulling out Arthur’s copy of the Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy, and handing it to Arthur, “you should read more.”

“Oh, into space, is it? And i suppose that you’re the new owner, are you?”

“Well, no, actually,” said Arthur. “I just sort of found this space-ship here and there doesn’t seem to be anybody in it and there’s no one outside and it did look like it’s been parked here an awfully long time—”

“Oh, so you’re stealing it, then?” said the llama with suddenly much more interest in its voice. “That’s much better.”

“Well, i wouldn’t call it stealing so much as, um, recycling, i suppose, since it was just discarded here in a way.”

“Right,” said the llama. “Let’s go.”

The door snapped shut, the ladder retracted, and with a throbbing hum, the ship bobbed above the grass for a moment, then shot upward into the blue sky.

of wrestling with the controls and ignoring countless alarms and warnings to throw the craft into a spin and bring it out going backwards. Since the onboard computers assumed that if the retro engine was on full-blast, the ship must be slowing down, therefore all must be safe and OK, so all the alarms and warnings shut themselves off. This quickly became the standard way to fly a PEE-Coupe. Billions more were sold.

When the manufacturers of the PEE-Coupe decided to discontinue production, the per-unit costs had become so low that they realized that it was cheaper to keep making them and write it all off as a tax credit. The PEE-Coupe soon became the standard corporate fleet vehicle because they were reliable, safe, and essentially disposable.

Underneath the text were pictures of him and Ford. Ford's picture looked to be a staff mugshot and he looked much younger in it. Arthur's picture seemed to have been taken from a security camera somewhere and he didn't look happy in it. Arthur read through the message three times. Did this mean that Ford and Fenchurch had gotten away and were running for their lives? Or did it mean that the Vogons weren't actually taking them to Fonk? Or was this message simply outdated? Or was this all just a ruse to trick him into believing that Ford and Fenchurch were OK when they actually weren't? And who were those Vogons working for, anyway? Arthur started to get a headache. Finally he decided that this bit of knowledge didn't change the fact that he'd lost touch with how long he'd been on this planet without a decent loaf of bread and regardless of whether any one of his friends were in immediate danger or not, he wanted to leave.

He started looking up how to fly a spaceship, but there were hundreds of pages about hundreds of spaceships and they all seemed to have different controls and he had no idea what kind of spaceship he was sitting in. There didn't seem to be any label identifying the type of spaceship this was except for the name plate outside the door, but searching for "Machina X" in the Guide brought up nothing. About the only useful bit of information Arthur got out of the Guide was the first bit of information that came up when he started searching for how to fly spaceships, but he had initially dismissed it because it seemed too obvious. Now, however, it seemed his only choice. "Let the computer do it," it had said. This would have been fine for Arthur if he could figure out where the ship's computer was (if it even had one) and how to turn it on.

Arthur spent a good hour or so trying to find a button on the control panel or some switch somewhere labeled "computer", and then spent another hour digging through the Guide again, trying to find some information about turning computers on, but it seemed that the Guide assumed that all spaceships always had their computers on, so why would you need to have it explained?

In frustration, Arthur yelled at the Guide. He knew that this

pening or even to let out any sort of utterance of surprise, his vital organs were pushed up into his nasal cavity where they swam a few laps before splitting into four pieces and flowed down his arms and legs where they were squirted out his fingernails and toenails. They swirled around in front of him for a moment singing God Save the Queen, while his spinal column randomly rearranged itself to a rumba beat and his skin spun itself around his bones a few times, before smooching back into his head through his eyes and ears. Another couple of laps through the brain and then everything seemed to find its way back to whatever body cavity it came from.

Arthur found himself sitting with his eyes tightly closed, gripping his chair with enough force to strangle a full-grown gazelle. He eased himself out of panic mode and opened his eyes to find that the PEE-Coupe was slowly hovering along the floor of an enormous parking garage, with ships of all sizes and shapes parked in rows. A pleasant voice was saying "Welcome to the Big Bang Burger Bar. You will be parked in section 3H47-Delta-4RW-Gamma-9, row C, space 12. Please make a note of it."

lation on a deserted planet and he wouldn't have to go chasing a sofa across a field to get off of it.

After walking around the ship, Arthur discovered the door and tapped hesitantly on it. There was no response. He knocked again, this time louder.

"Hello?" he called out. "Is anybody there?" But still there was no answer.

To the side of the door there was a small sign displaying what was probably the name of the ship. It read "Machina X". Under the sign was a keypad, and Arthur considered this for a moment, then punched in 1-2-3-4. Halfway through this activity he realized how dumb it was, because what kind of moron would program the entrance to his ship to be 1-2-3-4? There had to be thousands, if not millions of combinations and even if Arthur started at 0-0-0-0, then tried 0-0-0-1, and so on, it would probably take him years to figure it out and he'd probably be better off just trying to smash the door open or something. On the other hand, it's not like he had anything else to do on this planet. Any attempt to rescue Fenchurch from those two Vogons would probably be moot, as she'd likely had her brain removed for examination by now.

Arthur was startled out of his brief but meandering thought process back to reality by the fact that the door on the spaceship had unsealed itself and slid open just after he'd pressed the number 4 and a short set of steps was now extending to the ground at his feet.

"Hello?" he called out again, this time into the dimly lit interior of the spaceship. "Is anybody there?"

There was no answer. Arthur climbed in and looked around. The interior of the spaceship was neat and clean with an assortment of odd knickknacks here and there. It looked not only well-used but also well-maintained and had a slight musky odor about it. Arthur was very much reminded of his grandparent's kitchen. He examined each cabin and found no one in any of them and guessed, judging from the very dead and dried up bunch of flowers in a wall sconce, that the ship must have been sitting here for quite some time. The curiosity of what had happened to the occupants flitted across Arthur's mind, but these thoughts were hastily pushed out of the way by the realization that he

"Look, Ford!" said Arthur, pointing at the hover-bot. "There's someone else here named Dent! I wonder if we're related?"

"That's us, dimtwit," grumbled Ford under his breath as he kicked Arthur's other shin.

"Oh! We have reservations, then?" asked Arthur brightly.

Ford was just about to locate another piece of Arthur to kick when he apparently found what he was looking for on the device in his hand. He looked up and grabbed Arthur's outstretched arm. Arthur had just been about to wave at the little hover-bot with his name on it, but Ford turned him back toward the elevators in an excruciatingly casual pursuit of an elderly couple heading in that direction.

Ford pushed Arthur into the elevator behind the couple, despite Arthur's meek protests. He then reached into his bag and made an elaborate show of waving something in front of a small screen in the elevator, while smiling at the couple. This seemed to have the desired effect that Ford was hoping for. The woman touched the man's arm and said "Oh, yes, the token." The man then reached into a pocket and pulled out a small token which he waved in front of the little screen with much less flourish than Ford. The door of the elevator closed and another pleasant voice said "Time key recognized. Thank you for dining with us. Have a stargalactic trip home!" The elevator door slid open and Arthur was once again surprised to see that they were someplace else, this time back in the parking garage.

The couple in the elevator nodded at Ford, who was still smiling stupidly, and left the elevator. Ford waited until the door started sliding shut before leaping out of the elevator, giving Arthur a violent tug in the same direction. Arthur tumbled to the floor, right in the path of the elevator's door, which stopped just before it hit him, but then started gently nudging him out of the way. This was, after all, a busy elevator and it didn't have much patience for laggards who couldn't get themselves out in a reasonable amount of time. Arthur was just trying to get himself up when the elevator ran out of its small amount of patience, tipped Arthur's legs out of itself, and slammed its door, sending Arthur sprawling into a heap again, this time smacking his face against the hard floor and bloodying his nose.

So that was how Arthur spent his time. Wander, tap tap, fling. Wander, tap tap, fling. Every once in a while he would check his Sub-Etha Sens-O-Matic, but no one seemed to ever fly anywhere near this planet. Every day when it rained he stripped down and bathed, and he took a nice long afternoon nap whenever he felt like it, since it was perpetually afternoon.

Living such a boring life gave Arthur plenty of time to think. He thought about Fenchurch and Ford, he thought about Trillian and Random, he even thought about Od and wondered what his other head was doing. But the thing he thought about the most and consumed his thoughts until he thought that he might go mad, was bread. White bread, wheat bread, rye bread, rolls, kaisers, buns, pitas, tortillas... anything bread-like, he thought about it. It was maddening. Here he was, living among the best lettuce, tomatoes, and bacon-like meat he'd ever tasted anywhere, and he couldn't make a sandwich!

And then one day, as Arthur was imagining a nice, thick slice of tangy sourdough bread, he tapped on a tomato, flung his knife over his shoulder, and instead of the usual thud of the knife hitting the ground or the occasional "thrrk!" of the knife hitting a flidge, there was an unnatural metallic "clank!" followed by the more normal "thud." His first thought was that the flidges had developed some type of armor against his knife, and he turned around to see if that was the case, but there was no flidge to be seen and his knife lay on the grass, not near anything metal which would have explained the "clank!" After a moment, he decided that he must have imagined it, which must mean that he was going mad, which made him happy because that would make his boring existence here more interesting.

He walked over to pick up his knife, but just before he got to it, he felt an uncontrollable urge to change course slightly and walk past the knife, leaving it on the ground. After a few paces past the knife, he wondered what he'd done that for, turned around, and went to pick up the knife again. Once again, he suddenly had no desire to walk toward the knife and veered off slightly, walking a few more steps beyond it again.

"Look," said Ford, dropping all pretense of having any patience left, "we're not having lunch. I'm sorry Arthur, but we had to come here because this is the cheapest way to time-travel, and in order to get here, we had to make reservations. We certainly couldn't use *my* name, people know me. So we used yours. That's why there's a little hover-bot up there bleeping forlornly because it can't find 'Dent, party of two.'"

"Well, why don't *i* go up and have a nice lunch while *you* find whatever time-ship you're looking for? It seems a shame to disappoint the hover-bot."

"No, Arthur, no," said Ford, squeezing the bridge of his nose with his fingers and scrunching his eyes shut. He found it difficult to not add "bad monkey!"

"Why not? It doesn't take two of us to use that sens-o-thingy. I'll just nip upstairs—" Arthur paused, realizing that he wasn't at all sure if the Big Bang Burger Bar was indeed *up* from where they were.

"Arthur," said Ford, "i was trying to avoid telling you this, but it's very important that we stay together. The complexities of inter-temporal parking are staggering. The probability of us finding each other again is very very very very very small, and it's vitally important that i have you with me. It's important to me because i have a chance to erase a huge amount of debt. It's important to Squinkles because he gets to find the answer to some billion-year calculation he's been working on. It's important to Fonk because, well, i don't know why it's important to Fonk, but it probably is important to him somehow. And it's important to *you*, Arthur, because..." Ford paused, dreading the reaction that his next statement was going to have on Arthur. "Because you get to go back to Earth."

Arthur considered this for a moment while Ford winced and leaned away from him.

"Wasn't the Earth blown up?"

This wasn't the reaction Ford had anticipated. "Er, yes. From the when that we came from, it was destroyed. But from the when i'm trying to get us back to..." He tapped the Stell-O-Sens Time and Age Meter. "It's still there."

front of him to notice that he didn't get to push any buttons again.

The first button had caused a burst of light to blast from the Vagon ship to the engine port of the orange spaceship, and the once-powerful engines on the once-sleek spaceship abruptly quit. The second button activated a winch that would begin hauling the orange spaceship back to the Vagon pursuit craft. Ergo and Nnngk sat there smiling, not at all bored.

almost lost as it wandered around with a sad-sounding "bloomp", followed by "Dent, party of two?"

Arthur managed a stealthy exit from the elevator this time without having to be thrown out of it and was amazed to find that every spaceship in the garage appeared to be different. At first he assumed that this must be a different garage, but then he noticed the spots of dried blood on the floor where his nose had met it the last time he was here.

the galaxy. She wondered if it was possible for one person in one lifetime to see it all. As a matter of fact, it *wasn't* possible, but no one had ever proved this because anyone who'd ever tried had died of old age in the process and subsequently no research was ever published.

After a night's sleep at a rent-a-bed concession, which felt an awful lot like sleeping in a filing cabinet, Fenchurch discovered the spaceport's chart rooms. She spent the rest of the day there looking at all the different planets in the galaxy that she had time for, which, percentage-wise, wasn't really all that many. She found Fred, Engreedle 5, Colambft, and Earth, which just showed up as a dust cloud with the moon wobbling around in it. She tried to look up Beeble, but the star charts didn't seem to have any record of it as a planet, a city, or even a star. She thought this to be odd, and hoped that Ford knew what he was talking about when he said that they were going there.

Fenchurch arrived at dock gamma-5 to find Ford sitting on the floor with an empty bottle of Old Janx Spirit, a black eye, and a wad of Altarian dollars sticking out of his shoe. He grinned at Fenchurch, raised the empty bottle to his lips, then promptly fell asleep.

Half a tock later, Ford and Fenchurch were in the small cabin of an interstellar freighter as it undocked from the spaceport. Fenchurch had negotiated their passage on the ship with the pilot, who seemed to not care at all if they came along, as long as they brought their own food. She quickly purchased some supplies with the money in Ford's shoe and hauled him on board along with the food.

After the pilot had navigated the exit from the Alpha Centauri system and plotted their jump to hyperspace, he retired to his bed, muttering something about not bothering him until they dropped back out of hyperspace. Since Ford was busily sleeping off a two-day drinking spree, Fenchurch was left to watch the stars or read through Ford's copy of the Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy. Even though the Guide has more information in it than anyone could read in a lifetime (although this is also unproven), one can only do so much reading about places one's never been before getting tired of it. Fenchurch was beginning to realize just how fantastically boring interstellar space-flight really was.

tinues to educate the finest minds in the galaxy to become extra-spatial inter-temporal parking engineers. So far they've produced three graduates, and two of them work at the Big Bang Burger Bar.

Chapter 43

“Money,” said Ford again to the humanoid in the small shop off the main trading complex of the Alpha Centauri spaceport. “Earth money. Very valuable.”

The proprietor of the shop pawed through the bills and coins and offered Ford a sum in Altarian dollars, which Ford accepted. Ford wasn’t much for bargaining, thinking it mostly a waste of time.

They had done well. Since the existence and now nonexistence of the planet Earth had recently become common knowledge, the value of Earth items was quite high on the collectibles market. The items in Fenchurch’s bag had given them enough money to get by at the Spaceport until Ford could figure out where to go. Fenchurch was surprised that the item that got them the most money was the key to her flat, which was on a cheap plastic key ring with a picture of a cartoon character on it.

Now that they had money, they got some lunch, even though the last meal Fenchurch had eaten was also lunch. Ford explained that, really, lunch was the best meal to eat at any time because it offered the most variety at the least cost, and since you could get lunch pretty much any time you wanted to, there wasn’t much point in bothering with breakfast or dinner.

After a satisfying and cheap lunch, Ford and Fenchurch went to look at the shipping schedules to see where they might be able to hitch a ride to. They both stood in front of a large display board, Fenchurch wondering where all the strange-sounding planets were, Ford muttering to himself about the possible options. After a bit, Ford suggested that they go have a beer and he’d figure it out later. They went into one of the many bars, where a few freighter pilots were watching a ballgy match on a large display screen. Fenchurch noticed that the ballgy field wasn’t rolling like the one on Engreedle 5, but every once in a while a patch of grass would pop up violently, tossing whatever play-

like a manned attendant booth with robotic armed security cameras all around it. “Why don’t we just ask the attendant?”

Ford looked at Arthur the way someone might look at someone else who’d suggested “Why don’t we jump in the rock crusher?” or “Why don’t humans ever sleep with lions?” He continued to stare at him in that way until Arthur got up and started walking over to the parking attendant’s station. Since Arthur was a necessary ingredient in Ford’s debt-salvation, he quickly got up and ran after him.

“Er, ah, Arthur... i... i don’t think this is a smart thing to do. Y’see, uh...”

Just then Arthur arrived at the door of the parking attendant’s station and knocked on it. Three things happened at once. One was that a lot of lights and alarms started flashing and buzzing. A second was that a large array of weapons of all sizes swivelled around to point at Arthur. The third was that Ford dove for cover behind a nearby barrier.

Inside the parking attendant’s station, Bloora McElmickmik and Dinzy Ht’loc were hard at work. Since the Big Bang Burger Bar parking facility was one hundred percent automated, their work consisted mainly of watching the security monitors and deciding who’s turn it was to go on break.

Bloora, who was on break, looked up from her hands, which she’d been clasping and unclasping over and over. “Didja just hear something?”

Dinzy looked away from the monitors where she’d been watching the same two people walking oddly around the parking garage over and over. “Huh?” she said.

“A noise,” Bloora said. “I just heard a kind of knocking noise. Didja hear it?”

Dinzy checked her pockets because she couldn’t think of anything else to do, then looked under the desk, then shrugged and went back to watching the two people, one of whom had just gone out of viewing range, the other of whom was crouched down behind a low wall.

Arthur knocked on the door again. The weapons all tried to look even more threatening and menacing, but other than point themselves at Arthur, there wasn’t a whole lot else that they could do.

Bloora looked up. “There it is again!”

Chapter 42

The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy describes the great spaceport at Alpha Centauri as "the most convenient shipping point in the galaxy." This is not because it has the most number of freight lines going through it. Nor is it because it's nearest to the most shipping lanes. Nor even is it because it's closest to the center of the galaxy. The great spaceport at Alpha Centauri is none of those things. It is relatively small, as spaceports go, it doesn't lie next to *any* major shipping lanes, and it is nowhere near the center of the galaxy. In fact, it sits way out in the Western spiral arm of the galaxy parked in orbit around the star Alpha Centauri, which has no inhabited planet orbiting it and very few inhabited star systems anywhere near it.

The closest inhabited planet to Alpha Centauri used to be a little blue-green planet which the native socialized species called Earth, but was mostly unknown to the people coming and going from the great spaceport at Alpha Centauri because the people who created Earth were very careful to keep it off the star charts. Most travelers only heard about Earth because of the news reports that it had been blown up. And nobody really cared because who's going to care about something that you never knew existed ceasing to exist?

This question of existence and non-existence was exactly what made the great spaceport at Alpha Centauri so convenient. Alpha Centauri sits just inside sector ZZ9-Plural-Z-Alpha. And as anyone with a rudimentary knowledge of geo-galactical spatial-temporal physics knows, things originating in a plural-Z sector have the alternately annoying or convenient habit (depending on the situation at the time) of suddenly not existing where they'd been steadfastly existing only seconds before, or vice-versa. This is why many major shipping companies liked to ship certain cargo through Alpha Centauri. If a shipment arrives at its intended destination and there happens to be no shipment on board, the freight company can blame it on sector ZZ9-Plural-Z-

Ford heard all of the alarms go quiet and assumed that this was because Arthur had been systematically vaporized by a large number of weapons. He cursed himself for letting this happen, then slowly peered over the barrier to where Arthur had been. He wasn't at all surprised to discover that Arthur wasn't exactly where he'd last seen him, but he was astonished to discover that Arthur was just entering the attendant's booth.

"Excuse me," Arthur was saying to Bloora and Dinzy, who looked just as astonished as Ford was, "i don't mean to trouble you, but i seem to have lost my, er, that little token thing and i can't find my space-ship. Is there any way you might be able to help me, um, find it?"

Bloora and Dinzy had never been asked by anyone for help before but they quickly started falling over themselves in a mad attempt to be utterly helpful. Bloora suggested places to look for the missing token, Dinzy suggested things that might be similar to a token that might work, and Arthur tried to explain that he didn't think that he'd be able to find the token at all. In the midst of all of this cacophony, Ford stepped into the room and with a loud "ahem", shutted everyone up.

"How about," he said, exquisitely calmly, "You just forget about the token and help us find where our ship is parked?"

There was a moment of silence.

"Who are you?" asked Dinzy.

"I'm with him," said Ford, pointing to Arthur.

"And you've lost a ship too?" said Bloora, thinking that it was immensely odd to have two people both lose their spaceships at the same time.

"No, we've lost the *same* ship," said Ford. "And if you, ah... ladies," guessed Ford, "could perhaps guide us to the correct temporal garage, we would be ever so thankful and regard you highly, especially in detailed stories to our friends and relatives."

This seemed to please both Bloora and Dinzy, which made Ford relieved that he'd guessed the correct gender.

"Now, when you have to go out of your tidy little booth here to check on a spaceship, say, in an emergency, how do you get to the right garage?"

Chapter 41

“Bacon!” said Fenchurch, thoughtfully sucking on a bit of Ford’s Wonda Towel.

“Where?” asked Ford, taking the towel from her.

“This spot here,” said Fenchurch, pointing to a spot on the towel. Ford put it in his mouth and nibbled on it. “No, no, no, this is definitely East Floorkian grilled planka.” He sucked on it a bit more. “With flumaise sauce.”

“Really,” said Fenchurch, with much skepticism.

Ford and Fenchurch were sitting on crates in the cargo hold of a large space freighter, taking turns identifying spots on Ford’s nutritive towel. It was an interesting way to pass the time and stave off hunger, but Fenchurch suspected that Ford was making up half the foods he was claiming to taste.

Their journey from Fred had started out with them comfortably zooming away in the smooth bucket seats of Fonk’s now-battered spaceship, but Ford soon became aware that they were being followed by an ugly yellow brick-like Vogon pursuit craft, so he decided that they’d have to abandon the sporty ship, which Ford was a bit reluctant to do since he had been hoping to sell it. But dealing with a lack of money was better than dealing with Vogons, so Ford aimed the spaceship at somewhere billions of light-years away, got out his Sub-Etha Sens-O-Matic, and he and Fenchurch were plucked out of their sporty spaceship into the belly of a galactic space freighter which was heading to the great trading post at Alpha Centauri, leaving the Vogons to pursue an empty orange spaceship for, Ford hoped, ever.

“Attention,” a voice rang out through the cargo bay. “We are approaching Alpha Centauri. Please prepare yourselves.”

Fenchurch looked around at the various shipping containers they were sitting among and thought that maybe she should find something to hold on to. She was starting to get used to space travel, but

Chapter 23

Ford went bounding off to the elevators with Arthur in tow. They stepped into the first available elevator and as soon as the door closed, Ford waved the token in front of the small screen. In a few seconds, the door slid open again and they were looking at the garage, but with all different ships in it. Ford ran off to find the light blue cruiser. Arthur followed along, marvelling at the different spaceships. He thought that some of them looked familiar, but he’d been in so many iterations of this garage, that didn’t surprise him.

When Arthur arrived at row C, space 11, he found Ford halfway up into an open panel on the engine compartment of the light blue cruiser. After a few moments of tinkering and hammering on things, a door on the side of the craft slid open and a short staircase extended down to the floor. Ford dropped to the ground as well, slammed the engine compartment shut, and climbed into the ship. Arthur was about to follow him in when he noticed the small cream-colored PEE-Coupe with the Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy logo on the side of it sitting in space 12, right next to the light blue cruiser. He decided not to say anything and entered the cruiser.

After a few more minutes of Ford pulling on wires underneath one of the instrument panels, the ship came to life and soon Arthur and Ford were sliding along past the attendant booth (where Bloora and Dinzy appeared to be having a heated argument and didn’t see them go by) and out of the garage. Arthur settled himself into his seat and was about to ask Ford if they were likely to experience the same gut-inverting sensations as when they arrived here when his brain suddenly descended into his groin and his limbs liquefied and oozed out all over the floor of the spaceship. His eyes briefly took over the job of pumping all of his blood while his heart and lungs played ring-around-the-rosey in his ribcage, but to a calypso beat. He thought that he heard Ford saying “wheeeee!!!”

he also decided that Arthur wasn't turning out to be the great tmik-tmik bait that he'd hope for, so he and Luwielooowhee hopped into their spaceship and blasted off, leaving Arthur to his one-sided conversation.

The planet where Arthur now found himself was called Tiofftu, although Arthur didn't know that. It and its twin planet Dentpar orbited each other exactly between two stars, which orbited each other. The result of this situation was that the weather on both of these planets was always warm and sunny, with a nice rain shower every day at the same time. Whether it was a morning shower or an afternoon shower Arthur couldn't tell because, from his perspective, the sun that he could see just circled around the sky and never set.

Both Dentpar and Tiofftu had been colonized and the colonists had set about planting gardens and building a society, but after a while of living in what might be considered a warm, calm Spring day with a pleasant midday shower, every day, nonstop, without even a night between the days to break up the endless sunshine, the entire colony died of boredom.

By the time Arthur arrived, there wasn't much left of the society or their gardens. He determined that Tiofftu was home to exactly three types of plants and three types of animals. The first plant was a very short grass which covered everything and made the whole place look like one giant, rolling, well-manicured golf green. The second was a towering vine-type plant which produced tomatoes the size of watermelons. The third, and most useful, was a large-leafed lettuce-type plant that grew to well over Arthur's height. Not only was it edible, but the leaves could be used for shade, shelter, or bathing in.

Of the three types of animals on the planet, only two appeared to be native. The third one was Arthur himself, and he wasn't sure what his role in the ecosystem was, if in fact he had a role, but he decided to include himself just so that the plants wouldn't outnumber the animals.

The other two animals on the planet Arthur had discovered in quick succession. The first was a half-slug, half-beetle type thing about the size of his fist that apparently liked to live inside ripe tomatoes.

Chapter 24

"It's best not to know" is the central tenet of Ignism.

Ignism (or, in some parts of the galaxy, Ignicism, Ignatism, or Ignoramusism) was founded by the great Pleadian belief-thinker Bonya Ig. Ig spent the bulk of his time thinking about faith and trying to design the perfect belief system which would comfort ordinary people and offer them peace of mind, give strong morals, and not start any wars. This proved to be a monumental task, and Ig spent most of his life working on it. Eventually he came up with a massive volume of rules, laws, examples, stories, and parables which, in his eyes, was the perfect religion. Unfortunately, his only copy of this important text was completely destroyed in a perfectly ordinary cribbage accident, and Bonya Ig was left with the task of spreading his ideas by word of mouth. He quickly learned, however, that it would take him another half a lifetime to tell anyone all of his comprehensive plan, so he gave up and whenever anyone would ask him about his perfect belief system, he replied "It's best not to know."

His followers of course took that to be their sacred text and Ignism was born. It spread rapidly throughout the galaxy partly because its bible was only five words long, but mostly because there weren't a lot of rules, laws, examples, stories, and parables about how to eat, what to wear, and when to worship. In fact, there wasn't much worshipping at all, which made it very attractive to a lot of people. Most of the tenets and creeds of Ignism were passed by word of mouth, and quite a lot of these teaching sessions involved sitting on a couch eating salty snacks and watching Udrian Ballgy. Ignism became very popular with many sports fans in time-travel-heavy parts of the galaxy because when it came to enjoying a good game in an area where it was possible to flit forward in time to find out who won, well, it was best not to know.

After the rapid spread of Ignism reached a certain point, there

was still closed and locked and seemed to have survived the laser battle fairly intact.

“How are we going to get out?” she asked, surveying the scene.

Ford looked at her and grinned again. “No one who would steal this ship would *ever* think of damaging it in *any* way, now would they?”

Fenchurch had a slight feeling of unease which rapidly turned into full-blown fear as Ford gunned the ship upward and slammed into the ceiling of the hangar, causing much denting and crumpling to both surfaces involved. On the fourth smash, the ceiling gave way and Ford and Fenchurch screamed off out of the atmosphere at a most-likely illegal rate of speed.

It was at this point that Fonk was having a frustrating conversation with a cheerful elevator who said that it couldn’t take him to the roof of the building because the top of the elevator shaft had been blown up.

Chapter 25

Arthur looked at the image on the viewscreen in front of him with a mixture of awe and joy. It was of a medium-sized blue-green planet orbited by a single desolate moon and orbiting a medium-sized yellow star. Earth. Arthur had no idea how it came to be that he was alive, wiped out of existence, alive again, then somehow transported back to his home, but at this point he decided that Ford was right, it’s best not to know.

“It’s beautiful, isn’t it?” Arthur said to Ford.

Ford had been busy checking readouts and twiddling with knobs during the short time since the light blue cruiser had emerged from the Big Bang Burger Bar parking gateway, and he seemed a bit nervous. Of course, nervous, for Ford, simply meant not spinning around in his chair. At the moment he was slowing the spacecraft down in preparation for entering the Earth’s atmosphere, while at the same time ignoring Arthur.

Arthur wasn’t paying much attention to Ford either, as he watched the Earth get larger and larger in the viewscreen. He was trying to figure out, by where the continents were in relation to the sun, what time it might be in England, and if that time might be tea time.

“Where are we going first?” asked Arthur eagerly. “Straight to my house, perhaps? I wonder if i have bills to pay?”

Ford kept piloting the spaceship, but decided to devote some brain energy to Arthur at this point.

“Er, yeah, about that, Arthur... Look, i really tried to find a ship that’d get us here at least a few weeks early, so that you could have some time, but unfortunately, this cruiser was as close as i could get without having to wait a couple decades, and it’s cutting it a bit close.”

Arthur was staring happily out the window now, humming a little tune about tea time. Ford flipped a switch and all of the windows went black. Arthur came crashing out of his reverie and looked at Ford.

ing, swiveled around, and pointed down at Ford. There was a short pause, during which Fenchurch backed away from Ford.

“Wait a minute,” said the nasally voice. “Why do you want me to shoot you?”

“I’ve decided to end it all,” said Ford, cheerfully, “and i was told that *this* was the security door that was stupid enough to do it for me.”

“Oh,” said the security door, and the laser gun re-aimed itself at Ford. There was another pause.

“Wait a minute,” said the door. “Who told you that?”

“Oh, the security door on that hangar over there,” said Ford, gesturing toward the hangar.

“He said that?” A couple more panels popped open, revealing a larger laser gun and a Sens-O-Lens, which zoomed in on the hangar.

“Oh yes,” said Ford casually. “He said that you were quite the imbecile. Very very very dimwitted i believe is what he said.”

“Is that right? Well, i have half a mind to shoot him, i do.”

“Only half a mind, yes, yes, he went on about that. I warned him that you’d probably shoot him, but he said you didn’t have the guts.”

“Oh no?” said the door, and a quick, sharp, loud laser blast screamed across the rooftop and left a nice black hole in the side of the hangar. Ford strolled over to the door on the hangar while Fenchurch stayed a bit out of the way.

“Did you just shoot me?” said the security door on the hangar to Ford as he approached. Three or four laser guns were protruding from the wall and his Sens-O-Lens was whipping about, hunting for the source of the blast.

“Me?” said Ford. “Oh, no. It was that pompous security door on the elevator shaft over there. He said that he could shoot at you all day and not worry about it because your aim was so bad you couldn’t hit the broad side of a planet.”

“Did he now?” said the door, and a multitude of panels opened to reveal a multitude of laser guns.

“Probably oughtta teach him a lesson,” said Ford, backing away quickly.

“Yeah, i should,” said the door.

They sat in silence, thinking, while the cruiser became less and less smooth in its overall flight characteristics.

“Do you suppose it’s that nice older gentleman from the pub?” suggested Arthur helpfully. “The wiry one with the white hair, sat in the corner, didn’t say much... I always thought he seemed rather bright... Now, what was his name?”

“Name!” Ford shouted as he sat up straight. He rummaged through a few pockets until he pulled out a slip of paper, unfolded it, and read the name printed on it out loud. “Fenchurch Pan Dowdy.”

Arthur’s heart crammed itself up into his throat, then exploded out of his fingertips and danced a two-step around the room, but this time in a good way.

“F—Fen... Fen...”

“Fenchurch Pan Dowdy,” Ford repeated. “Is this a man or a woman? Your species has such odd names.”

“Fenchurch!” said Arthur. “You’ve met her, Ford. She was at my house!”

“Really? When?”

“It was when that huge robot landed on Harrod’s. You dropped in, stole some video equipment... ahhh, Fenchurch!”

“Don’t recall. Is she pretty?”

“Fenchurch is the most beautiful woman in the world!”

“All the better, is she single?”

“No. Well, technically yes i suppose.”

“Smasho! Where does she live?” asked Ford, who by this time had pulled the cruiser out of its death wobble and sent it screaming down toward England.

“London,” said Arthur, “Islington. Oh, it will be so good to see her again!”

“London it is,” said Ford, nudging the craft further downward. “I didn’t know you had any friends in London, Arthur. How come i never met her?”

“Oh. Well, you weren’t around when we met, see, it was a rainy day...” Arthur rambled on about all of the different rain he’d seen that day while Ford swooped in over London. It was a crisp, clear day with

stop in for a bite at a local café and then, well... Then a spaceship landed and i was rescued from Earth just before it was blown up and i put a fish up my nose and travelled back in time and ate strange new foods and watched a very odd sporting event and was abducted at gunpoint and... well... Now that all of that's happened, i don't seem to remember all of that meaning of life stuff that i was thinking about back on Earth."

Fenchurch looked from Fonk to Squinkles, who were both watching her thoughtfully.

"Sorry..." she added.

After an uncomfortable silence, Squinkles turned to Fonk. "May i speak to you in private for a moment?"

"Certainly," said Fonk. He lay his hand down on the table and Squinkles scampered on to it. Fonk gave Ford a suspicious glance, then swept out of the room and closed the door behind him.

When the door clicked shut, Ford leapt up and put his ear to it. After a moment or two, Fenchurch whispered "What are they saying?"

"They think you've been tainted," said Ford. He continued to listen for a bit, then frowned. "OK," he said, walking over to the large desk, "time to go."

Ford opened the largest drawer in the desk to its full extent, then reached in and rummaged around behind it. There was a metallic click, then Ford stepped back and pulled the drawer open further than it ought to go, revealing a large chute that went down into the floor. "After you," he said, gesturing to the chute.

Fenchurch looked hesitantly at the dark opening, but didn't jump into it.

"Trust me," said Ford, "you don't want to stay here." he grabbed the edge of the desk, swung his legs into the chute, then let go and slid out of sight. After a couple seconds he called back. "It's quite safe!" and in that couple seconds Fenchurch decided that she liked and trusted Ford a whole lot better than the creepy guy with the extra elbows and the talking mouse. She grabbed the desk and hopped into the chute after Ford.

Chapter 26

Fenchurch Pan Dowdy sat in her favorite cafe on a pleasant morning which seemed like most other pleasant mornings except that she had this nagging feeling that she was on the verge of understanding something *big*. Not something mildly big like a unified field theory or a generalized social interaction formula for all peoples of the world, but something *really big*. She felt as if the weight of history had been crammed into her brain and it made her head hurt. She tried not to think about it and looked out of the freshly washed café windows to the street. There appeared to be a lot of activity down the street but she couldn't see what the commotion was about. She saw an interestingly dressed man running down the street yelling something who everyone seemed to be giving a very wide berth. "Probably an escaped mental patient," she thought to herself. She watched him as he stopped at each shop on the opposite side of the street, poked his head in, yelled something, then continued on. She wondered what he was yelling, but didn't have long to wonder about that because the man suddenly crossed the street, ran by the cafe where she was sitting, skidded to a stop, poked his head in the door and yelled something that made Fenchurch freeze in a mixture of amazement, fear, and curiosity. If someone had asked her the least likely thing an escaped mental patient would be yelling as he ran down the street, this would probably be it.

Ford poked his head into the cafe, yelled "Fenchurch!" and looked around. "Fenchurch Pan Dowdy?" Everyone in the cafe, just like everyone else in every other shop he'd been in, stared at him, motionless. He was beginning to think that this wasn't the best way to find someone, but he shrugged, ducked out of the shop, and continued down the street.

Fenchurch sat there for a minute or two at a loss as to what to do. This man was obviously looking for her, but who was he? And what did

assured me that this is the correct specimen.”

“I see, i see,” said Squinkles, glancing at Ford, then surveying Fenchurch up and down again. “You don’t suppose that this species has a dimensional flux inside their skulls to allow for a larger capacity?”

“Not that i’m aware of,” said Fonk.

“Um, excuse me,” said Fenchurch. “Why does everyone think that i’m supposed to have some sort of humongous head?”

There was a pause as everyone in the room except for Ford considered this.

“Well, we just naturally assumed—” began Fonk.

“Assumed what?” said Fenchurch. “That your ultimate question must be so exceedingly complex that it couldn’t possibly be stored in the single normal-sized brain of a human being? Maybe it’s simple. Maybe your grand, unifying theory of everything can be summed up in a single sentence, like ‘love your neighbor,’ or ‘war, what is it good for?’“

“Or, ‘what do you get when you multiply six by nine?’“ suggested Ford.

“Well, we know it’s not *that*,” said Fonk, glaring at Ford.

“Or how about,” continued Fenchurch, “‘To be or not to be, that is the question.’“

“It is?” said Squinkles, looking as excited as it’s possible for a mouse in a fez to look.

“That’s not a question,” said Fonk. “That’s a statement.”

“It is?” said Squinkles again, not at all excited, although no one could tell the difference.

“Sure it is,” said Fenchurch. “You’re given two alternate positions and asked whether it’s nobler to be or not to be.”

“What nobility is there in not being?” asked Squinkles.

“Well, maybe that’s what Shakespeare was asking,” said Fenchurch.

“Who?” asked Fonk.

“Shakespeare,” said Fenchurch. “that’s who wrote that whole ‘to be or not to be’ thing. Very famous English writer.”

“Whatish writer?” asked Squinkles.

black hole and Arthur was any object that happened to be too close to that black hole.

“Fenchurch! I—I’ve missed you so much!” said Arthur as he went in for an embrace. It was at this point that Arthur discovered, as many awkward people in history had independently discovered, that it takes both parties of an intended embrace to have some idea of what is about to transpire or else one of them is left standing uncomfortably with arms outstretched while the other does not stand as such, but steps cautiously backwards out of harms way. Arthur of course was the one with his arms out, Fenchurch the one backing up. Arthur stopped.

“Fenchurch?” he said, surprised and confused.

“Yes?” said Fenchurch. “You both have been saying that a lot now. I’d think you’d have figured out that i am who i am.”

“It’s Arthur.”

“Arthur who?”

“Arthur Dent.”

“And i know you from...?”

“We... we were... together. We went flying together!”

“Oh! Were you that guy sitting next to me on that flight from Amsterdam last summer?”

“No, we actually flew... in the sky...” Arthur feebly flapped his arms a little since they were still outstretched in anticipation of the embrace which looked less and less likely to happen. Ford had been watching this exchange and took this opportunity to step between Arthur and Fenchurch.

“Pardon us a moment,” Ford said to Fenchurch, then turned to Arthur. “Arthur, a word with you, if i may?” He took one of Arthur’s outstretched arms and walked a few paces away from Fenchurch. “Tell me. When exactly did you two meet?”

“Well, it was—well, i can’t say exactly how long ago but we met, let’s see...”

“Let me put it this way,” said Ford, with utmost patience. “Did you meet her *before* i first took you off this planet, hitchhiking with the Vogons, or *after* that?”

“Oh, it was definitely after. It was raining, and i—”

and eventually were marched into a large well-appointed office where Fonk was waiting. He dismissed the Vogons and locked the door behind them.

“Hello again,” he said to Ford. Ford didn’t say anything. “And this must be Fenchurch?” he said, turning to her.

“Um, yes. Hello,” said Fenchurch, eyeing the oddly double-elbowed arms of Fonk and wondering whether handshakes were customary in other parts of the galaxy that weren’t Earth. Fortunately, Fonk didn’t offer his. He just stood there and looked at her carefully.

“Her head looks awfully small,” he said, turning to Ford. “Are you sure you got the right Fenchurch?”

Ford shrugged and sat down in one of the comfortable chairs in the office. “How many Fenchurch’s can there be? It’s a very uncommon name.”

“Yes, but there were billions and billions of creatures on Earth,” said Fonk. “Elementary statistics suggests that—”

“It’s a very *very* uncommon name,” said Fenchurch.

Fonk looked at her skeptically. “Fenchurch Pan Dowdy?”

“Yes, that’s me,” said Fenchurch, wondering what it was about her that made her not look like what someone named Fenchurch should look like.

“Hm,” said Fonk, tapping his fingers to his lips. “Well, we shall see. Let’s hope for everyone’s sake that she is indeed the right Fenchurch Pan Dowdy of Earth.” He looked suspiciously at Ford.

“Well, Arthur seemed pretty sure,” said Ford, slouching down in his chair. “Knew where she lived and everything.”

“Ah, yes, Mr. Dent. Quite an integral piece of this puzzle and so blissfully unaware of his own worth. If only you could have been bought for a new outfit and a travel bag of gadgets and souvenirs, Ford.”

“Say, that reminds me,” said Ford, sitting up. “When do i get paid?”

“Your debt will be erased as soon as the transaction with Squinkles and Miss Pan Dowdy is complete. If you remain a decent fellow for the rest of your stay here at the Guide, i may even approve all

And maybe plant a garden.”

Ford considered how best to answer this when something happened to answer it for him. There was a great roar as a large ugly yellow thing streaked across the sky. This was followed by a bang loud enough to turn milk into cheese on the spot.

“Belgium!” said Ford.

“Wow!” said Fenchurch.

“Vogons!” said Arthur. He turned to Ford. “Is it Thursday?”

“I’m sorry Arthur. I tried, i really tried, but this was as much time as i could get. Now, as you can see, *we really* have to leave *now*. So if you wouldn’t mind loading our cargo,” Ford gestured at Fenchurch, “i’ve got a quick errand to run and i’ll be right back.”

Ford dashed off and Arthur looked at Fenchurch.

“What was that yellow thing?” she asked.

“Vogons.” said Arthur, haplessly. He set off toward the spaceship. Fenchurch followed.

“What are Vogons?”

“Ooh, you don’t want to meet one.”

“Where are they from?”

“I don’t know... planet Vogon?”

“Where are *you* from?”

“Er, well, just west of London actually. A very nice little village that’s about to be destroyed.” Arthur paused. “Again,” he added.

“Oh. I’m sorry.”

“Yes, well, all of this,” he gestured around him, “is going to be destroyed fairly soon as well. That’s what the Vogons are here for.”

“Why would the Vogons want to destroy Islington?”

“Oh, it’s not just Islington. It’s the entire planet,” said Arthur. “Seems they want to build a space freeway or something and apparently we’re in their way.”

They arrived at the light blue cruiser parked in the middle of the street. “Well, climb aboard,” said Arthur, somewhat glumly.

Fenchurch normally would have been a bit more cautious about climbing aboard a spaceship belonging to a nice gentleman from the west country, but what with all of the weirdness in her head and the

ish. That thought was quickly replaced by the thought that his feet had lifted off the ground, his legs had elongated and wrapped themselves three or four times around his body, and his arms had turned into neon pink garden hoses which were spraying confetti everywhere.

After a few seconds of this, his body returned to its familiar humanoid shape and Arthur crumpled to a heap on the rubberized floor of a neat but cluttered little spaceship. A man in hiking shorts, suspenders, and a bright orange shirt was standing over him.

“Howdy!” said the man. “Welcome aboard! Where ya headed?”

Arthur shook the grogginess from his head. “Fred,” he said, looking around at his surroundings.

“Hiya Fred!” said the man. “My name’s Smeerpop. This here’s my wife Luwielowhee.” He pointed at a woman sitting in a chair knitting what looked like braided wire into what looked like a hat of some kind. She too was wearing hiking shorts, suspenders, and a bright orange shirt. “Hey Lu! This here’s Fred.”

“Arthur,” said Arthur.

“No, Smeerpop,” said Smeerpop, pointing at himself.

“No, *my* name’s Arthur. I want to go to the planet Fred.”

“Oh, Fred. Ain’t been there. Not exactly on our way, neither. But we’ll getcha somewhere, won’t we Lu?”

Luwielowhee nodded, smiled, and kept knitting.

out over the Thames. Ford leveled out just above the water and increased speed until the passing boats, docks, buildings, and bridges were gray and brown blurs whipping by. In no time, or what perhaps seemed like no time, but was in fact some time, although not a lot of time, the Thames widened out and the light blue cruiser screamed out into the North Sea in a giant arc heading up the coast of England toward Scotland and points north. Or, more precisely, to a single point north.

“Where are we going?” asked Arthur.

“North Pole!” said Ford, keeping one eye on the skies above them and one eye on the seas just below them. This of course is just a figure of speech. Ford couldn’t really move his eyes in two different directions (unlike the people of Ursoid 3, who can and like to do so quite often just to annoy the people around them who can’t), but he was doing his best to look in two places at once and still fly the spaceship. So far he was doing OK.

“Why do we have to go to the North Pole?” asked Arthur.

“Because of the magnetic fields,” said Ford. “Only place to get out of the atmosphere without the Vogons spotting us.”

“Oh,” said Arthur.

“South Pole would work too, but this one’s closer.”

“Oh,” said Arthur again. He glanced over at Fenchurch and gave her a reassuring smile and nod. He marvelled at how well she seemed to be taking all of this. Half-an-hour ago, she was sitting in a cafe on a perfectly ordinary normal Thursday and now she was about to go into space with two strange men, one of whom wasn’t even from Earth, and she seemed to accept that fact so easily. It was an admirable trait and a trait that was one of the reasons that Ford found Arthur, despite his tendency toward complaining about everything, to be a trustworthy and fun companion. Here Ford was, whisking Arthur off of Earth just before its destruction again. He had a sense of respect for Arthur that he rarely showed. Selling him into slavery was just a temporary necessity brought on by the situation.

Perhaps it was the fact that Ford was thinking about this, or maybe he was just too busy trying to do three things at once, but what happened next was probably a direct result of what Fenchurch said to

“Nope!” said Od, as he pulled something out of a jar and bit into it.

“Very good sir. Miss Trillian, I saved the latest episode of The Quantrino Basing Challenge for you. Would you like to view it now?”

“Sure,” said Trillian, flopping down on a large couch. The wall in front of her flicked on and the program began.

“Er, excuse me,” said Arthur, looking from Trillian to Od. “When are we going to Fred?”

“Who’s Fred?” said Od, between mouthfuls of whatever it was that he was eating.

Arthur clenched his fists and tried to remain calm. “Fred is the planet where the Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy headquarters is.”

“Yeah? So what’s there?”

“It’s where Ford and Fenchurch have been kidnapped to!” said Arthur, trying not to scream.

“Ford’s been kidnapped?” said Od, pulling another thing out of the jar he was eating from. “I thought he was shot.”

“Yes, well, he... Look, can’t we just go there?”

“Go wherever you want monkeyman, I’m not stopping you.”

“I... I thought you were going to give me a ride.”

“I *did* give you a ride. From Engreedle 5 to Bleen. You were there, now you’re here. If you wanted to go somewhere else, you should have told me when we were flying. I’m done flying for today.” He bit into another one of the somethings from the jar and chewed noisily.

Arthur started and stopped about four sentences without managing to figure out what he wanted to say except that he was very annoyed right now but couldn’t find the vocabulary to express just how extremely annoyed he was. Around about the fifth false start, Trillian turned around on the couch.

“Arthur!”

Arthur stopped trying to vocalize his emotions and looked at her.

“You have a Sub-Etha Sens-O-Matic in your bag. Why don’t you just hitchhike there? It’d be easier than getting old one-head over there to do it.” Od grinned and waved his hand around where his other head used to be.

“Hitchhike?” said Arthur.

“Excuse me,” said Fenchurch. “Didn’t you say that the Earth was going to be destroyed?”

“Oh yes,” said Ford. “Spectacularly.”

“Well then shouldn’t we be trying to get off of it?”

“Yes, Ford, she makes a good point.” said Arthur. “Couldn’t we hitch a ride with the Vogons again?”

“I’d rather not,” said Ford. “They’re—” He stopped and looked out the window of the spaceship, then ran over to it and peered intently into the greenish water outside. Did he really just see what he thought he’d seen? Yes! There it was again. He dropped his beer and ran to the back of the spaceship. Arthur and Fenchurch watched in confusion as he opened a hatch in the floor and disappeared down into it. After a bit of banging and a couple of creative swear words, they saw light streaming up at them through the hatch and they could smell fresh air.

“I think he’s ditching us,” said Fenchurch.

“No, he wouldn’t...” said Arthur. Then he thought about it for a moment. “Wait, yes he would.”

Arthur ran to the hatch and Fenchurch followed along. They descended down through it and found themselves in what appeared to be the maintenance and storage area of the ship. In the middle of the floor was a second hatch, thrown open, with sunlight streaming in through it. Arthur knelt down on the edge of it and looked down to a most unsettling sight. Below him was blue sky, sunshine, and a few puffy clouds. He leaned down further until his head was below the edge of the hatch and felt a most unsettling sensation. His head was now situated in a normal world, with sky above and the bottom of the light blue cruiser spread out around him, but his body still felt like down was up and up was down. This so disoriented him that he lost his balance and fell up through the hatch until half his body was above it and half below, at which point he fell back into the spaceship before falling back up through the hatch before falling back down into the spaceship and so on until Fenchurch finally grabbed his feet and threw him out of the hatch and he landed sprawled out on the belly of the cruiser. He climbed to his feet as Fenchurch carefully wormed her way out of the hatch.

Arthur Dent was lying on the floor of the concourse of the Engreedle Ergies Ballgy stadium. Trillian and Od were standing over him.

“See? I told you he was just sleeping,” said Od. “I don’t know why your species needs so much sleep. Snargly waste of time.” He stepped over the velvet rope that had been set up around the sprawled body of Arthur and was immediately distracted by something in a nearby shop. “Oooh! That’s cool!” he said as he walked away.

Trillian helped Arthur stand up and he tried to work the stiffness out. Then he remembered why he was there.

“Where’s Fenchurch?” he asked, looking up and down the concourse.

“I dunno,” said Trillian. “I thought she was with you.”

Arthur spun around in a near panic. “Fonk!” he said.

“Who’s Frank?”

“Fonk,” said Arthur. “He the head of the Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy. I’ve got to get to him. They can’t take Fenchurch’s Brian, didn’t you tell me that?”

“Who’s Brian?”

“Brain!” said Arthur. “Her brain! You told me they can’t take it. I’ve got to get to Fred!”

“Who’s Fred?”

“Fred is the planet where the Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy is!!!” yelled Arthur, completely exasperated.

“Arthur, you’re not being cool.”

“Of course i’m not being cool! My girlfriend’s been kidnapped by Vogons, Ford’s been shot—”

“Ford’s been shot?” said Od, wandering back over with a new hat on.

“Er, yes.”

“When?”

“Well, just before i was.”

“You were shot?”

Arthur looked dumbfounded. “Didn’t you just see me lying unconscious on the floor?”

“I thought you were sleeping,” said Od. He turned to Trillian.

“Arrr, sit tight mateys,” said the dolphin. “Ye needn’t be shark bait to them bilge-sucking Vogons.” And with that the dolphin executed a neat flip and disappeared under the water.

Fenchurch had just executed a neat flip up out of the hatch and landed gracefully on both feet on the belly of the spaceship when she heard the Vogon’s PA announcement begin. “What’s that?” she called over to Arthur.

“Beer!” shouted Ford. He ran over to the hatch and dove through it past a startled Fenchurch.

“It’s beer?” she asked, as Arthur came over to her.

“It’s the Vogons,” said Arthur, looking up at the sky as the announcement went on. “They’re just announcing that they’ll be blowing us up now.”

The announcement faded away as Arthur and Fenchurch stood on the belly of the upside-down spaceship in the middle of a rolling sea on a clear day with blue skies as far as the eye could see. It would have been very romantic if it weren’t for the imminent total destruction of human civilization.

Ford popped up out of the hatch with a neat flip, a case of beer in his arms.

“Drink up!” he said, handing out bottles. “Drink, drink, drink!”

“Ford, why—” began Arthur.

“Muscle relaxant,” said Ford between gulps.

“Oh,” said Arthur. He took a beer and looked at Fenchurch. “You’re going to need this.”

“I am?” she asked.

“Trust me,” he said, and took a long swig, wondering where he was going to be in a few seconds.

“Say Ford,” he said, after a couple swigs, “why do they talk like pirates?”

“Who, what?” said Ford.

“Pirates,” said Arthur. “That dolphin was talking like a nineteenth century pirate.”

“What’s a pirate?” asked Ford.

Arthur thought about how best to explain what a pirate was, but

“Arthur Dent,” said Arthur Dent, bravely but stupidly.

“Right,” said Ergo. “Fonk said we had no use for you.” He pulled out a laser pistol and shot Arthur in a snap of light.

In the few milliseconds that Arthur still had the brain capacity to imagine things, he imagined that this was what it must feel like to be stung by ten thousand fire ants all at once. Then he collapsed to the floor.

Chapter 27

The O Company of East Passiac, Dermalus Pi, is well known for its Kill-O-Zap line of personal warfare devices and slightly less well known for its Blast-O-Cell line of high-powered localized organic disintegrators. But its big money-maker, and the product that turned the company around after its Wond-O-Paste line of electronic protein paste synthesizers failed to perform well in the galactic marketplace, is the Grav-O-Mat. Nearly every spacecraft manufacturer in the galaxy installs Grav-O-Mat brand gravity simulation and stabilization decking in their product lines because of the Grav-O-Mat’s excellent safety record.

There are cheaper options for maintaining a relatively “normal” gravity on a spaceship of course. The main competitor of Grav-O-Mats are the GalactoTech Gravity Retention Sheeting Pads, which are mostly used in refurbished holiday rental runabouts, and have known problems with maintaining an even gravity level, but don’t usually fluxuate far enough to maim or kill. For the truly cheap and legally non-culpable, there’s the Gargox Corporation of Epsilon FP9, who makes the Happy Walk Walk G1 Base (Its slogan: “For excellent always make stable intercourse, yes!”). This product has been implicated in a large number of deaths, mostly due to extreme fluxuations in G-forces. There was the couple on a business trip in a rented Flydenza who suddenly found themselves sucked flat into the carpeting when the Happy Walk Walk G1 Bases installed in their ship got stuck at a G-force of 127. The funeral home had to use a centrifuge to separate the couple from the flooring they’d ended up being a part of. Then there was the Betel-Freight Spaceline cruiser in which various Happy Walk Walk G1 Bases throughout the ship fluxuated far into the negative G-forces, sending random passengers into or through the roof of the cabin, depending on the negative g-force and relative mass of the Happy Walk Walk G1 Base and passenger involved.

“Arthur, when you’re me, and you’re so quite obviously not, and someone pages you to be at Information Booth Nine, the *last* place you want to go is to Information Booth Nine!” He took one last glance around the concourse, then took off in the other direction, walking quickly, but, he hoped, non-suspiciously. Arthur sighed and followed him, and Fenchurch followed them both as the nice businesslike voice came on over the public address system again.

“Will Mr. Ford Perfect now please report to Information Booth Ten. Ford Perfect to Information Booth Ten, please. Thank you.”

Ford skidded to a stop, eyeing Information Booth Ten, which was just down the concourse from where he’d stopped. He looked around at the various shops and dove into one that sold hats and jerseys of the home team. A hover-bot sailed over Arthur and Fenchurch’s heads as they walked toward the shop. It stopped in front of the shop and hovered, blue and green lights blinking. The public address system came on again.

“Will Mr. Ford Perfect—” began the nice businesslike voice before a voice in the background said “*Pre-fect.*”

“Don’t tell me what to say!” snapped the first voice, coldly, before resuming its nice businesslike tone. “Will Mr. Ford Perfect please remain in Souvenir Shop Four. Ford Perfect, remain in Souvenir Shop Four, please. Thank You.”

Arthur put a hand on Fenchurch’s arm and stopped in the middle of the concourse. He decided that maybe they’d better let this play out rather than be a part of it. In a second or two, Ford came bolting out of the shop wearing a magenta and green Engreedle Ergies Ballgy team jersey and hat, still with the tags dangling off of them. He ran by Arthur and Fenchurch as an alarm wailed and a security-bot zoomed out of the shop after him. The hover-bot that had been waiting outside the shop took off after Ford as well and in a matter of seconds, both bots had fired snare-nets at Ford, which brought him crashing down to the floor in the middle of the concourse. he lay very still and both bots circled over him, beeping. Before long, the beeps from the two bots became louder and more frequent and some whistles and squeaks were thrown in as well, until they were bumping each other and

Chapter 28

Arthur’s body oozed itself back into humanoid form as his brain oozed itself back into consciousness. He’d never been comfortable with being zapped off of a planet and onto a spaceship, as he was assuming had just happened, but this time at least he was pleased that he hadn’t slammed into the floor of the spaceship ungracefully in front of Fenchurch. In fact, he felt a very womb-like serenity, almost as if he was floating. In a very rapid sequence of human emotions however, his outlook went from calm, to unease, to surprise, to fear, to utter panic. This happened because he opened his mouth and his eyes at the same time and the only thing that met them was a dim and unbreathable amount of water. In a few seconds his muscles kicked in and he arrived gasping, spluttering, and thrashing about at the surface of the water. He found himself in what looked every bit like the inside of a spaceship, except that it was filled nearly to the ceiling with water. Fenchurch was coughing water out of her lungs next to him and Ford was happily swimming laps around them both.

“Hey Arthur!” yelled Ford. “Indoor pool! Pretty fancy!”

“Where are we?” asked Fenchurch.

“Front row seats for the show!” said Ford, pausing to point out one of the windows near the ceiling. They all looked out just in time to see a brilliant flash of light, followed by the largest bit of fireworks they’d ever seen, as billions of bits of the earth fizzled and faded to embers. In less time than it takes for an everyday normal bottle rocket to whoosh and burst, the Earth was no more, leaving nothing but a fleet of ugly yellow Vogon constructor ships receding in the black distance.

“Wow,” breathed Fenchurch.

“Yeah,” said Ford.

“Why is it,” Arthur asked aloud, “that i always seem to be around when the Earth is destroyed?”

Arthur and Fenchurch treaded water in silent contemplation of

Chapter 37

The Ballgy match was tied at 3 all and at the moment the ballgy was sitting in one of the goals resisting efforts by both teams to get it out. There was a knot of players in front of the goal trying to position themselves so that it would be one of the opposing players who would end up getting thrown at the ballgy.

Ford took this opportunity to go out for a snack and a drink and returned shortly with a look on his face that, had it been on anyone else's face, would have conveyed complete normalness, but on Ford, for anyone who knew him, it could only be described as something close to concern.

"Charge card wouldn't work," he said, sitting down next to Arthur with a beer and a plate of something that looked like a pile of deep fried poker chips with a creamy blue salad dressing on them. "Hadda pay cash!"

"Say, Ford," said Arthur, "how long has it been since we left Fonk and Squinkles?"

"Hm. Don't know. Chip?" Ford held out one of the deep fried things.

"Er, no. Look, Trillian told me that we've sort of skipped ahead in time a few years and—"

"Arthur!" interrupted Ford. "Taste this!" This time he held out his cup of beer. Arthur sighed. Getting more than a sentence into or out of Ford had always been difficult. He took a sip of Ford's beer.

"What's it taste like?" asked Ford, eagerly.

"Beer," said Arthur.

"Let me try," said Fenchurch, curious. She took the cup from Arthur and sipped, swirling it around in her mouth a bit before swallowing. She tipped her head sideways and thought a bit. "Y'know, it tastes like a London Pride."

"It does, doesn't it?" said Ford. "Too much like it!"

"How is that possible?"

"Time travel, apparently."

"I see," said Fenchurch, almost understanding what was going on, but not quite. "So, um, what do you guys, uh, do?"

"I was in advertising," said Arthur, glad for a chance to talk about a topic that he actually did know something about. "and then i traveled around the galaxy for a bit, and then i, er, lived in a cave... i traveled some more... then i was a sandwich maker... and then most recently i was someone's pet," he finished brightly.

"I'm a very famous researcher," said Ford before diving down to the bottom of the cabin and back up.

"Oh?" asked Fenchurch when Ford's head bobbed back above the surface. "In what field?"

"All of them," said Ford. "Arthur, i'm going to have to add a section to the Guide about hitchhiking with dolphins. Slammily hoopy!"

Fenchurch watched Ford playing in the water then looked over at Arthur, who shrugged as best one can shrug while floating up to one's neck in water. She smiled at him in a way that made him think that perhaps something may work out between them, despite the less-than-suave way he behaved when they met for the first time again not more than an hour ago. After all, she'd been quite mentally ill when they'd met for the first time the first time, back on whatever Earth that was, which seemed like ages ago to Arthur now. He sighed and wondered how he was going to manage going through the whole weird human courtship ritual again. He thought that it would be easier having already done it once with the same person, but at the moment it didn't feel any easier.

who was talking to the one with all the sunglasses on, remember him, dear?”

“Mm.”

“Well, i thought he looked a lot like the man in that note on the Guide, and then there was another man at the back of the group who looked very much like the other man in the note, and i just thought, well, that can’t be a coincidence now, can it? Didn’t i say that, dear?”

“Mm.”

“So then i thought, well, we wanted to stop by the Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy headquarters of course at some point on our vacation, so why not now? You put out such a fine, fine book. I don’t know how we’d get along without it, i just want you to know. We just love it, don’t we, dear?”

“Mm.”

“Yes, thank you,” said Fonk, not caring a whit what these peons thought of his magnificent book (and he did think of it as *his* book, not merely because he happened to be the president of the company at that moment, but also because he’d worked on the engineering of the book for quite a large portion of his career and helped to shape it into the juggernaut that it was today). “Do you happen to recall if they said anything in passing as to where they might be going? Hmm?”

“Well, er, no, not as such. But a lot of them seemed to be talking about a Ballgy game, so they may have been off to a match, wouldn’t you think, dear?”

“Mm.”

“Although i suppose that they may have just come from a match, too... I guess that’s not much help then, is it?”

Oh, no no, you’ve been quite helpful,” said Fonk with an almost-genuine smile on his face this time. “I don’t suppose that you happened to notice if anyone along with them had an unusually large head, did you?”

“Hmm, no, i don’t think so...”

“Well never mind,” Fonk said as he opened a desk drawer and pulled out a small card. He handed it to Pithya as he guided them out of his office. “You may use this card in the gift shop for any two mod-

Chapter 30

Arthur’s mingled thoughts about the Fenchurch he knew and the Fenchurch who didn’t know him were interrupted by another muffled pop.

“Ahoy, mateys! We’ve arrived at our first port o’ call. Wherefore ye be wishin’ to be set down?”

“Anywhere near a bar!” was Ford’s immediate answer.

“Arrr, consider it done.”

“Thanks for the ride!” piped up Fenchurch.

“Oh yes,” said Arthur, remembering his manners, “thank you very much.”

“Save yer thanks fer Davy Jones, Earthlings. ‘Twas nothing.”

“May you swim fair seas with the wind at your back!” said Ford.

“Arrr, so long, and thanks for all the fish!”

And with that, there was a flash of black light and Arthur, Ford, and Fenchurch disappeared out of water-filled cabin with a *vrmp!*

It was a slow evening at Pulp’s, a bar on the outskirts of one of the larger cities on Thumar 4, well traveled by locals and aliens alike. Outside the bar, there was a quick succession of *blick*, *bleck*, *blork* as three people who would be classified in the alien category materialized on the street in front of the bar. The first strode quickly to the front door of the bar. The second was staggering around trying to maintain her balance. The third was flat on his face on the ground. All three were dripping wet.

By the time Arthur and Fenchurch had recovered and entered the bar, Ford was busily downing the first of three beers he’d already ordered. He waved Fenchurch and Arthur over to him.

“Welcome to Thumar 4!” he said. “The best place in the galaxy to get Earth beer except for Earth itself. Don’t talk to anyone!”

“Yes.”

“Well, Ford made a deal with the president of the Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy to deliver you to a, um, being—” (he didn’t want to say “mouse”)—“who apparently is paying Ford an awfully large amount of money for your brain. Now don’t worry, i’ll be there with you and won’t let them cut you open or anything.”

“Thanks,” said Fenchurch, smiling.

“Although,” continued Arthur, “i’m a little worried that we might be a bit late. You see, we arrived at the Big Bang Burger Bar from one time and since we left in a different spaceship, we came back at a time that’s a few years in the future. Does that make sense?”

Fenchurch thought about it for a moment. “Yes, actually, it does. But was there a time-limit on this mission of yours to retrieve my brain?”

“Hmm,” said Arthur aloud, thinking about it. “I don’t know. Not that i know of.”

“Then who’s gonna care?” said Fenchurch. “If this being waited billions of years for an answer, or question, what’s a few more? Nothing!” She snapped her fingers for emphasis.

That made Arthur feel better. He sat back and relaxed a little. Although he was still a bit nervous. Would anyone care?

Fenchurch if i can’t, OK?

“Why can’t you?”

“I can! I think i can, anyway. But who knows what might happen, Ford. The last time we were in space together she just disappeared on a trans-galactic flight when we jumped to hyperspace. I’ve lost her once, i don’t want to lose her again.”

Ford set down his beer and looked at Arthur. There was an earnestness and sincerity in Arthur’s voice that made Ford realize that Earthlings were pretty fragile creatures.

“Alright Arthur. I’ll keep an eye on her. I promise.”

Ford had ordered Arthur a beer and they both sat there in silence, sipping their beers, until Fenchurch came back from the waste facility room.

“That, um, woman in there asked me something,” said Fenchurch, “but i couldn’t understand a word of it. Do you speak alien?”

“No,” said Arthur.

“Did you talk to her?” asked Ford.

“I said hello,” said Fenchurch.

“Don’t talk to anyone!” said Ford.

“Well, she asked—”

“Just don’t! Arthur, the sooner we’re out of here the better. Now just sit here, have some snacks, and no talking!”

Ford made a series of hand gestures to the bartender, who pointed to an alcove on the far side of the bar. Ford hurried off in that direction.

Arthur shrugged and smiled weakly at Fenchurch, who looked confused but still rather awe-struck by all that had happened. Arthur felt a little glow of pride in the fact that he could be the one to guide Fenchurch through all things extraterrestrial.

“We’ll have to get you a babelfish,” he said quietly. “I’ve got one in my ear.” He pointed at his ear and Fenchurch looked at it, but couldn’t see anything other than a normal human ear. Arthur shrugged weakly again and they sat there at the bar in silence as a crowd of Thumarians entered the bar.

“And then the bridge flew sideways with the fuzzy ears,” one of them was saying.

hostess now. It was so nice to see you!" She got up and slipped over to one of the other clients, whom she started fawning over. Arthur watched her for a while, wondering if he'd actually heard what he was pretty sure he'd just heard, and what it meant, if it was true. After a while, this hurt his brain, so he turned back to watch Fenchurch, who was still poring over the Guide. She smiled but didn't look up at Arthur.

"What about my brain?" she said, still looking at the guide.

"Oh, er, it's... it's, um, lovely," Arthur said, then made a very great effort to sit calmly and nonchalantly even though internally he was smacking his head very hard for coming up with such a lame description for a brain.

"It is?" said Fenchurch, looking up at Arthur's gallant effort at normalcy.

"Er, well, it, um..."

"Did you know that the beings who built Deep Thought were alive for its entire calculation? And then they had to go on living so that they could build the Earth and then they had to live through *that* calculation. That's an amazingly long time. I think i'd go mad. And how do you just *build* a planet, anyway?"

"Oh! I met the man who did it!" said Arthur, happy to have something to say on the subject.

"Really?"

"Well, he designed the fjords of Norway, anyway."

"Really."

"His name is Slartibartfast."

"What?" said Fenchurch, barely suppressing her laughter.

"You see? That proves that i've actually met him. If i was making this all up, why would i invent such a silly name?"

"Why *wouldn't* you?" asked Fenchurch.

Before Arthur had a chance to attempt any more logic, Od announced that they'd arrived at Engreedle 5 and that no one had to do anything if they didn't want to but he, Ford, and Trillian were going into the stadium to watch a cool Ballgy match. Everyone got up to follow them.

"I have the feeling that this is all some strange dream and that i'm going to wake up home in my bed, but i'm not, am i?"

"No," said Arthur, sadly. "I've found that there are a lot of odd places on Earth, but the rest of the galaxy is a million times odder."

Chapter 35

Arthur and Fenchurch sat apart from everyone else in one of the lounges in the chrome spaceship. Arthur had his copy of the Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy out and was showing Fenchurch how it worked and all of the information it contained. They looked up Udrian Ballgy and read all about that. They looked up the Big Bang Burger Bar and read all about that. Then Arthur looked up the Earth and was surprised to discover that the entry he remembered had been changed. Instead of the two simple words "mostly harmless," the entry now had three words, which were of even less help. It read "See Deep Thought."

Arthur knew the whole story of Deep Thought and had covered the basics already with Fenchurch, but since she was a fairly integral part of the whole story, Arthur figured that she ought to read all about it. He was content to sit next to her and watch her read, but Trillian caught his eye and sat down on his other side.

"Arthur! It's so cool to see you!" she said in her new bubbly voice. Then she leaned in closer. "How did you get out of that bar alive?"

"Er, i don't know," said Arthur. "I just woke up and i wasn't there anymore."

"Me too!" said Trillian. "Did you end up in a garden? I woke up in the most beautiful garden in a public park on Reinus 8. It was so calm and peaceful, it made me realize that i really needed to simplify my life, but i couldn't do that because i kept thinking about everything all the time. So i went to find someplace cool to hang out and ran into Od and he suggested that i have a bit of my brain removed, so i had the surgery and it's been wonderful. I just don't think about anything anymore, isn't that cool?"

Arthur looked at her for a moment, barely believing that this was the same Trillian who was once Tricia McMillan who was once someone that Arthur felt that he'd really connected with on an intellectual

if it were in the afternoon and the skies were cloudy, the same question would be "Please sing for the collar?" And if the person asking the question weren't sure if it was morning or afternoon, then the question might be "I'm curious about rising millet prices when stapling seaweed. Does glaucoma count?"

When a non-Thumarian arrives on Thumar 4 to sample its hearty array of quality ales, the poor babelfish in his, her, or its ear tries mightily to translate the meaning of the Thumarians speech, but eventually gives up and starts humming tunelessly. This causes the host entity to assume that the babelfish has gone bad and they very often yank the fish out, throw it away, and get off the planet as soon as possible. A Thumarian will then come along and collect the discarded babelfish, selling it at 100% profit. The Thumarian babelfish salesmen have learned to speak using simple conversational phrases and lots of gestures and usually inform their customers that their babelfish are so fresh that they're likely to just hum for a while until they settle into their new host's ear and the host won't hear any translating until they've left Thumar 4. Most people, being stupid, buy this, buy the fish, and leave Thumar 4 humming tunelessly. There have been many cases where a clever babelfish salesman has sold a visitor back the exact same babelfish that that visitor had just discarded, and as any economist can tell you, buying a commodity for zero Altarian dollars and selling that commodity for any amount of Altarian dollars greater than zero is good business.

Chapter 34

Udrian Ballgy is, according to the Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy, the most popular sporting event in the galaxy. Nearly every planet near the center of the galaxy has at least one Ballgy team, and most planets everywhere, if they don't have a team, have many many fans. Because there are so many many teams, the Galactic Udrian Ballgy Association decided at some point that it would take too much time and be far too complicated to have a regular season, so Udrian Ballgy is constantly in the playoffs, which of course tripled the viewing audience.

Udrian Ballgy was invented on Udr, and originally used the large seed pod of the ballgy plant as its ball, although today most balls are synthetic. The synthetic balls are carefully built to duplicate the characteristics of the natural ballgies, which are that it will occasionally roll around on the field under its own power, and sometimes it shoots poisoned spines into the legs of anyone near it, causing temporary paralysis.

There of course have been plenty of instances where games were protested, claiming that the synthetic balls were tampered with, causing it to favor one team. Because of this, there are still a number of teams who prefer to use natural ballgies in all of their matches.

The rules of Udrian Ballgy are quite simple. Two teams of twenty players each meet on a large field with a net on each end. The players try to get the ballgy into the opposing team's net, which scores a point, but if the ballgy rolls into the net your team is shooting at of its own accord, you lose a point. The game is over when one team is ahead by 5 points, when either team has no more players left who are able to stand and move about the field under their own power, or when either team reaches negative ten points. This sounds simple enough except that the number one rule in Udrian Ballgy is that no one is allowed to touch the ballgy with any part of their body and doing so results in a

Fenchurch glanced at each of them, then smiled and stuffed the fish up her nose. Ford looked surprised. Arthur looked appalled. Fenchurch kept herself from sneezing as the fish wriggled around in her sinuses, then she spun around in her chair and looked at the group of Thumarians at the table, listening. What she heard was this: "Glipz souuke florn shl'kin zouiit blue calves are supposed to stick out from your body!"

She spun her chair back around and smiled at both Ford and Arthur. "It works!" she said happily.

Both Ford and Arthur now had approximately the same expression on their faces, which was the same sort of expression that maybe a cow would give a tree. Fenchurch let them stare dumbly at her for a moment.

"Well i didn't want to only have to hear out of one ear," she said, "and since there are small ducts that run from the ears to the nose and there's really quite a lot of room in a human's sinus cavity, i thought that maybe that might be a better place for a fish. It's amazing! I can't even tell it's there!"

Arthur still stared, dumfounded.

"Ducts!?" Ford exclaimed, peering closely at Fenchurch's ears and nose. "'Why didn't you tell me about these ducts, Earthman?"

"Well, i..."

"Ducts! Neat!" said Ford, ignoring Arthur. "Say, she's pretty clever, isn't she? Round of beers for everyone, on me!"

Ford made some gestures to the bartender and waved at the bar in general. There was a murmur of appreciation from the people in the bar and the bartender started dispensing drinks. When Arthur got his and took a sip, he found it oddly familiar.

"Ford," Arthur said after another sip, "this tastes like a beer i used to enjoy at the Horse and Groom."

"It is," said Ford with a wink.

"So can you get any Earth product in space?" asked Fenchurch, "or just beer?"

"Just beer," said Ford. "Well, not any more." He sighed. "Y'know, it was a miserable little planet, but... to the Earth!" he raised his beer

center of the crowd, whom most people there seemed to be paying attention to. He was wearing two or three pairs of sunglasses, had a couple more tipped back on his head, and at least a dozen more scattered around his neck and hanging from pockets. He was regaling the crowd with some rip-roaring story that probably involved him doing many amazing things. Arthur was not at all surprised, and this made the presence of Trillian make a lot more sense, too, for the man in the center of the crowd was none other than the man that Arthur knew as Zaphod Beeblebrox, former President of the Galaxy and wanted in at least nine sectors for grand theft spacecraft, among other lesser charges. On second glance, however, Arthur considered that it perhaps wasn't the man Arthur knew as Zaphod Beeblebrox, since it appeared that, while he did still have three arms, he was down to only one head, and it sat off to the side on a bit of a tilt. Arthur didn't have time to wonder what happened to the other head because the head that was still there turned and saw Arthur.

"Monkeyman! I heard you were here! And you brought a date! Way cool! I was just telling everyone how you shut down an entire spaceship because you were trying to get the computer to make you a drink! What was that drink again?"

"Tea," said Arthur, a little nervously since everyone in the crowd was now looking at him.

"Yeah! That's it! Tea! Nasty, vile stuff. Totally uncool. But he shut down an entire spaceship! No lights, nothing! How cool is that?"

There was a brief round of applause from the crowd, then they went back to listening to Zaphod's remaining head. Ford waved Arthur over.

"Arthur! Change of plans. Now that we've got the, uh, goods," said Ford, nodding at Fenchurch, "and she's not in danger of being vaporized by Vogons, i thought we'd take a little detour with Od."

"Odd?" asked Arthur.

"Od Brox," said Ford, nodding at the remaining head of Zaphod. "The other head wanted to go all corporate, so he ditched him. This was always the more fun head anyway."

They watched as Od finished his story to another round of

go!" He ran over to the bar, signed his tab, grabbed his charge card, and quickly hustled Fenchurch and Arthur out of the bar.

"Straw?" yelled the old man as they ran out the door. "No! Too stupid a fad! I put soot on warts!!"

Parked in the street outside the bar was a small black and orange spaceship, lumpy but efficient. Ford dashed into the open side door, followed by Fenchurch and Arthur. Inside the small, low cabin were comfortable bench seats all along the walls. On the front wall was a window into the pilot's area where a disheveled young man sat, looking somewhat bored. He glanced back to see his passengers settling in. "Just the three of you, then? Where to?"

"The Big Bang Burger Bar!" said Ford. "We have reservations."

"Right-ho." said the pilot. He closed the passenger door and opened up the throttle to full blast, roaring up out of the atmosphere too fast for any local traffic agents to catch him.

"Where's the Big Bang Burger Bar?" asked Fenchurch.

"You mean when," said Ford.

"I do?"

"There's only one Big Bang, and it's a great place to have lunch."

"Really? *The* Big Bang?"

"The one and only," said Ford, slouching down in his seat. He fiddled with some knobs next to him for a bit, then looked back at Fenchurch. "The falcon flies?" he asked. "What possessed you to say that?"

"Well, i felt that someone should say something, and that's all i could think of that really fit into the sort of nonsensical stuff they were saying," said Fenchurch. "It's a line i had in a play when i was a little girl—my only line—and i've always remembered it. I thought maybe it might mean something to someone someday."

"Oh, it means something alright," said Ford. "Do you have any idea what it means?"

"Um, no," said Fenchurch, "what does it mean?"

"No idea," said Ford, and promptly took a nap.

to the answer to life, the universe, and everything. He told her about the Golgafrinchans and about living on prehistoric Earth and about Scrabble. And then he told her about Fonk and the Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy and about reverse temporal engineering. And finally he told her why he suspected that it was her that they rescued from Earth—because somewhere in her brain lay the billions-of-years calculation: the ultimate question to the ultimate answer to life, the universe, and everything. The question to which “forty-two” would seem like a reasonable answer.

When Arthur finished, Fenchurch sat quietly, thinking about everything he'd told her.

“You know,” she said finally, “just before you two landed in Islington, i was sitting in my favorite café thinking that i was on the verge of knowing something—of *really* understanding what life was all about. It was a confused jumble of too many thoughts at once and it was giving me a headache, but it seemed like i was just about to figure something out, something *big*.” She paused to look around at the Big Bang Burger Bar and outside at the Big Bang itself.

“But now i've been in space and watched a planet get destroyed and stuck a fish up my nose and traveled back in time to the Big Bang... and i'm just not so sure about everything.” She looked at Arthur and smiled. “But i don't have a really bad headache anymore.”

Arthur, at that instant, felt wonderful. He smiled back at Fenchurch and wanted this moment to last as long as possible, which, as was so often the case with Arthur Dent, wasn't possible.

“Arthur!” said a vaguely familiar voice. Arthur really didn't want to look away from Fenchurch, but when the owner of the voice stood right next to their table, he felt that he must be polite and look up to see who it was.

“Arthur, it's so good to see you!” said Trillian, or perhaps Tricia McMillan. Arthur wasn't sure which version of Tricia/Trillian this was, but in any case, neither one of them was who he expected to see standing next to his table at this particular time.

“Ford said that you survived the destruction of Earth again. So did i! Isn't that cool?”

“Hey,” said the pilot, “have i given you a ride before? You look awfully familiar.”

Arthur looked back at the pilot and thought about whether he'd ever been in an orange and black interstellar taxi before or not. He couldn't remember. He sat in silence and watched Fenchurch as she looked at the stars going by out the window.

“Well, here you go,” said the pilot a bit later. “Big Bang Burger Bar. Hang on!” He plunged the taxi into a big glowing funnel in space and after a lot of bodily inversions and a couple of foxtrots, the taxi pulled into the dropoff bay at the Big Bang Burger Bar.

Ford popped up from his seat and slipped his charge card through a slot to the pilot, who ran it through his charge machine. Arthur stood up and looked at the name and photograph of the pilot on a small plaque on the front wall. “A.G. Rahaj” it said. Arthur thought that this name sounded familiar, but couldn't place it.

“Have a good day, folks!” said A.G. Rahaj. He looked at Arthur. “And don't go tellin' no one 'bout what we talked about, now. Might get me killed!” He laughed and turned away as Arthur, Ford, and Fenchurch stepped out of the taxi.

Mr. A.G. Rahaj picked up a passenger at the Big Bang Burger Bar and flew him to his destination. All the while he tried to remember just where it was that he'd seen his previous passenger before and why that person had given him such a sense of unease. He finally figured it all out much later during the thirty seconds between being pushed out of an airlock in deep space and the point in time thirty seconds later when the condition that he had that is commonly known as “being alive” ended. Forty seconds earlier he'd been discussing with two shadowy individuals in long trench coats whether he'd ever run across any beings from a planet in sector ZZ9-Plural-Z-Alpha called Earth. Twenty seconds after that he thought that it would have been better to keep his mouth shut, and 20 seconds after that he realized that once again Arthur Dent had been the cause of his untimely death.