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This disclaimer applies solely to all regions of the planet Sol 3, Sector ZZ9-Plural-Z-Alpha, referred to locally as "Earth". Anywhere else in the galaxy, go nuts.

away from really bright light sources like flashbulbs or nuclear reactions. He headed for a door on the interior side of the room. As he moved toward it, a pretty young humanoid-looking person emerged from another cubicle and started walking toward him. Ford instantly adopted an air of casual nonchalance and passed by the woman with an airy wave and nod, as if he came into this building all the time and it certainly wasn't unusual for a scruffy ill-kempt shabbily dressed galactic hitchhiker to be strolling down an aisle between Happiwall cubicles. The woman smiled politely and passed by. Ford quickly grabbed the handle of the nearest door and ran out of the room of cubicles to what he hoped would be a way out of the building. His hopes were buoyed by the fact that he found himself in a long hallway with a bank of elevators nearby.

Once again Ford had the vague feeling of familiarity with the place. Some part of him wondered about this, but the part of him in search of a drink trumped the wondering part and he headed for the elevators. There was a pleasant "ding!" to announce that an elevator had just arrived to everyone on the floor, which at the moment consisted of just Ford Prefect, but at the next moment it was Ford and a very tall and gangly humanoid male with a dour but intelligent looking face who had just exited the elevator that had gone "ding!" and was now staring directly at Ford.

Ford imperceptibly flinched and was filled yet again by a vague sense, but this one was of uneasiness and foreboding. Ford instantly decided that he preferred the vague sense of familiarity.

"Ford!" the stranger exclaimed brightly. "I thought you might show up around now. I've been expecting you."

Arthur thought odd, but maybe he'd just misread the number on the preceding floor as a 4 when it was actually an 8. This made sense to him.

The number on the door of the floor below 7 was \boxtimes , which gave Arthur a vague feeling of uneasiness. He quickened his pace and when he got to the next landing down and saw that the door read \boxplus , he began to think that he was not on the planet Earth at all as he thought he'd been and things maybe weren't making as much sense as he'd hoped.

The sign on the door of the next floor down read \sqcup , which gave Arthur hope, even though it appeared that there were still a couple more floors below. He decided to give it a try and hope for the best.

It was locked. Neither the door nor the handle budged, despite Arthur's best efforts.

leftover fish salad. But he was very pleased to find that it contained twenty-seven bottles of beer. He took two, popped them open, and downed the first one on one draw before sitting down to enjoy the second one.

He got about halfway through the second beer (Beeble Brau #12: India Pale Ale) when a familiar voice drifted in through the open window.

"Aaaaugh!! My tomatoes!" screamed the familiar voice.

Ford glanced out the window and only now noticed that he'd set the oddly-angled brown glob-fish-smelling spaceship down on what appeared to be a vegetable garden.

"Hi Arthur!" said Ford, waving cheerily to the owner of the familiar, if somewhat distressed voice.

Arthur stared, dumbfounded, at Ford, looked back at the spaceship parked solidly where his garden once was, then marched moodily into his house.

"Sorry about that," said Ford, waving at his parking job. "Forgot to put the landing gear down."

"How could you forget to put the landing gear down?!" spluttered Arthur.

"I was hungry," said Ford.

"That doesn't make any sense!" said Arthur, feeling very annoyed with Ford but at the same time feeling grateful for some company.

"No it doesn't," said Ford, "but that's what makes it fun!"

Arthur stared at him for a moment, wondering if this kind of company was worth it.

"So how've you been, Arthur?" asked Ford. "Good life here? I see you've placed your house just about where your old one was. Very predictable, but then, you humans like familiarity, don't you?" he placed his feet on Arthur's home-made table and took another swig of beer.

"Now look here," said Arthur. "It's... It's good to see you and all Ford, but you needn't be so rude. I do, in fact, have a very nice life here. It's peaceful and relaxing and i can tend to my garden... or i could have, anyway, but now that you've smashed it..."

"I did say sorry."

Chapter 4

Half an hour later, Arthur had completed his second trip from the bottom of the staircase to the top and back again. He had tried every door on every floor from [4] to [E] and found every one to be locked. He did it twice just to make sure that he hadn't missed one. Now he stood in front of the door at the end of a narrow dim hallway under the bottom-most set of steps. He hadn't tried this door yet, partly because of the various red and yellow warning signs on it and the large loud-looking sirens and lights, but mostly because of the presence of a number of lethal-looking weapon-type things protruding from the walls and pointing at anyone who might be standing in front of this door with the thought of opening it.

Arthur stood there with the realization that he would now have to do something which he hated doing. He would have to go to each door on the floors above and knock, pound, or yell to get someone's attention so that whoever might hear him could open the door for him. He realized that this was necessary if he didn't want to spend the rest of his life in a stairwell, which he didn't, but doing this would require him to (and this is what he found so unpleasant) disturb people.

Chapter 64

The Encyclopedia Galactica defines "home" with a dry, antiseptic, catch-all explanation of residential dwellings and various life-forms' preferences for living in them. It goes on for pages and pages, explaining everything from mollusks to luxury resort planets, and it may very well be fascinating reading, but no one's ever read it. No one's ever read it because in all enlightened societies in the galaxy, no one cares. Most people know when they're home and they don't need any egghead research scientists and technical writers telling them why they're there when they're there.

The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy takes, as usual when comparing these two great works of galactic nonfiction, a much simpler tack. A home, the Guide researchers reasoned, is where people put their possessions, their bed, or their food. This holds true from the most primitive tree-dwellers to giant flippered heads who exist in a semi-aqueous solution and perform all societal interactions by brain-wave alone.

Since possessions are insubstantial and no one really needs a bed, the Guide has adapted the popular saying of the planet Boomseywhoop as its definition of home: "Home is where the refrigerator is."

him before), and why he was here. How he got here he still hadn't quite figured out but the where, why, and who pretty much put the how out of his mind. He was standing on a floor of a large H-shaped building that housed the offices of the greatest book ever published, the Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy. Standing in front of him was someone named Fonk who was apparently his boss. He briefly wondered what became of Zarniwoop, but wasn't at all surprised that his tenure as president and CEO of the Guide was over. What immediately concerned Ford was that it looked like he'd been brought here from the dead to be asked about the one thing that he'd spent his whole hitchhiking career trying to avoid: his expense account.

"Now," said Fonk, "if you'll just accompany me to accounting, i'm sure that we can straighten this all out."

Fonk smiled and gestured with one of his gangly arms towards the elevators. It was at this point that a careful listener would have heard the cries and crashes of dozens of elevator passengers all being forcefully dumped off of elevators on various floors of the building. This was followed by a group whooshing noise as every elevator raced to the floor where Fonk and Ford were standing in the hope that it would be the chosen elevator that would have the overwhelming joy of carrying Ford Prefect to Accounting. This would be a story that they could tell to passengers for years to come.

There was a near-simultaneous explosion of "ding!"s followed by the rumble of every elevator door opening and cooing out enticing voices to get Ford into them.

Ford took the opportunity of this sudden confusion, turned, and ran.

behind a desk in the center of the lobby. "You have a visitor?"

"Yes," said Slartibartfast. "This is Arthur Dent. He is looking for someone and seems to think that they may have ended up here. And by here, i mean, this planet. And if that were true, they most likely would have ended up here. And by here, i mean, this building."

"Name?" said the purple thing behind the desk. An appendage shot out of some area of the thing and accessed a computer. One eye swiveled around to look at the computer screen while the other eye pointed at Slartibartfast.

"Yes, i suppose they'd have one," said Slartibartfast. "Arthur?"

"No Arthur's," said the thing.

"Yes?" said Arthur.

"No," said the thing.

"I'm sorry?" said Arthur.

"You needn't be," said the thing. Arthur noticed that a third eye had appeared on the head of the purple thing and it was looking at him, while the other two eyes continued to look at Slartibartfast and the computer screen.

"Who are you looking for?" said Slartibartfast to Arthur.

"Oh," said Arthur. "Fenchurch. Fenchurch Pan Dowdy."

"Fenchurch Pan Dowdy," repeated the purple thing. "Arrived last week with entity Ford Prefect. Departed twenty minutes ago with entity Trillian."

"What?" said Arthur, in surprise.

"Fenchurch Pan Dowdy," repeated the purple thing again. "Arrived—"

"Trillian?" interrupted Arthur.

"Trillian," said the thing. "Arrived yesterday with entity I'm Not Telling You My Name You Weird Purple Thing. Departed twenty minutes ago with—"

"Where did they go?" asked Arthur.

"Where did who go?" asked the purple thing, politely.

"Trillian and Fenchurch!" yelled Arthur, becoming frustrated.

"I do not have that data," said the thing. All three of its eyes glanced at Arthur, then at Slartibartfast, then split three ways at

“No problem, i’ll just go out the basement.”

Ford leapt down the last set of stairs with Arthur following.

“Actually, i should have been more clear,” said Arthur “It’s not just that one, it’s all—”

Arthur stopped as the bang of Ford running into another door echoed throughout the stairwell. He caught up with Ford, who was standing on the landing staring at the door he’d just run into.

“Huh. That one’s locked too.”

“Yes, they’re all locked,” said Arthur, feeling slightly important for having known something that Ford didn’t but at the same time realizing that that didn’t improve their situation much. On the other hand, Arthur now had company.

Ford glanced nervously up the stairwell, then at the door, then at Arthur, then back up the stairwell.

“Hm,” said Ford, looking around at everything again.

“Hm?” asked Arthur.

“Hm,” said Ford again, sitting down on the stairs and fumbling through all of his pockets. He glanced up the stairwell again.

“Y’know,” he said, “normally when i’m making a mad dash away from someone there’s various lights, bells, whistles, and usually at least one person following me. In fact, usually there are quite a lot of people following me and the ones in front generally have a Kill-O-Zap or two and they feel the need to fire them in my direction at frequent intervals.”

“Say Ford,” said Arthur, suddenly remembering “Did Random come back to the hotel with you or with me? I must admit that my memory from last night’s a bit foggy.”

Ford looked up at Arthur. “Who?”

“Random. My, um, my daughter.”

“Oh, the psycho chick, right. No idea.” Ford stopped rummaging through his pockets after determining that they were all empty. He glanced up the stairwell again.

“Well, i do hope that she made it here safely,” said Arthur. “She’s a bit of a handful, but—”

“Say Arthur,” said Ford, interrupting. “Do you have any idea

Forty-two. Neat.”

There was a general murmuring that that was a pretty good question.

“So there really isn’t one unifying question or answer?” asked Fenchurch.

“No,” said Marvin. “Everyone has their own question and answer. The only one i know for sure is Arthur Dent’s. His question is ‘How many times must i kill the entity known as Agrajag?’ And his answer is forty-two.”

“Interesting,” said Fonk, stroking the protuberance on his head.

“Why’s that interesting?” asked Ford from the floor. He felt that he had to say something since no one had been paying attention to him for a while.

“Well, it just proves,” said Fonk, “that Arthur Dent is the most average person in the entire universe.”

There was another general murmur of consent.

“Say, where is Arthur, anyway?” asked Trillian.

Chapter 7

Underneath the Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy building is a parking garage. It's hardly ever used by people who are looking to park something because most of the planets that the Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy building finds itself on don't use any type of surface transportation that needs to be parked. But the designers of the building felt it prudent to prepare for any contingency in case they had to relocate for tax reasons to some backward planet where the civilization still used things like cars. The planet that the Guide currently called home was not backward at all. In fact, it was also home (although on a much more permanent basis) to the Nothaw Comet Board factory, widely recognized as one of the most technically advanced comet board producers in the galaxy.

If one were to visit the Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy headquarters (as most galactic hitchhikers want to do at some point in their travels) he, she, or it could consult the Guide as to a good place to stay while visiting. Many local flophouses and beaches may be recommended but the cheapest, and therefore most popular place listed in the Guide is the parking garage of the Guide itself. Since it is rarely ever used to park vehicles in, all of the security robots have either shut themselves off or set out hitchhiking the galaxy themselves out of sheer boredom. This of course left the garage quite empty and unguarded—a perfect place to set up camp for a galactic wanderer.

When Ford and Arthur ran out of the emergency stairwell exit into the parking garage, it was far from empty. Dirty freeloading hitchhikers from all over the galaxy were spread out in a miniature city like some outdoor festival rock concert, only in a big cement room.

Ford immediately slowed to a casual stroll. These were, after all, his people, even though he'd rather be partially digested in one of the external stomachs of the giant flesh-eating daffodils of Slemwort 5 than be caught anywhere near some of these riffraff, but he was a

"Now, as for you two..." said Fonk, looking at Trillian and Zaph. "Um, Marvin?"

"I fixed them," said Marvin.

"Fixed us?" said Zaph. "Whatdya mean, fixed us?"

Marvin sighed, which is not something that robots generally do, and is not at all a pleasant sound. "Apparently," he said, rolling his eyes over toward Zaph, "you had a deep neural Impen-O-Cloud placed in your brain which hid some things you weren't supposed to think about. And you had it transferred over to Trillian here, where it hid some things that she didn't want to think about."

"We know all that, metalhead," said Zaph.

Marvin looked sullenly at Zaph. "If you're not going to be nice, then i won't tell you," he said, then started humming a little tune to himself.

"Marvin," said Trillian, in her kindest voice, "we'd really like to know what you did. Can you tell us, please?"

Marvin rolled his eyes over to Trillian. "Well, alright."

"Thank you, Marvin," said Trillian.

"Well, once a deep neural Impen-O-Cloud is placed, it can't be removed, so i had to put it somewhere else.

There was a tense silence while Marvin looked at the floor.

"Where did you put it, Marvin?" asked Trillian.

Marvin glanced up at the people in the room, then back down at the floor. The silence continued.

"Well..." said Marvin.

"He put it in me," said Fenchurch, and all eyes in the room turned suddenly to her. If Marvin could have nodded, he would have, but since he was just a disembodied head sitting on a table, he did nothing.

"Ever since leaving Earth, i've had this nagging feeling in the back of my mind," said Fenchurch. "Something about the great answer, or question, about life, or something. And i could never quite figure out what it was. But now," she smiled happily, "it's not there. I feel..." she hunted momentarily for the right words, "at peace."

Everyone looked at Marvin, who was humming to himself again.

Arthur had a chance to follow him, the beaming woman stepped in front of him.

“Now now Dimpie, you heard the man. No running away. Now sit. siiiiiit!”

“Excuse me?” said Arthur.

The woman clapped her hands delightedly in front of her. “Oh! He talks too! I must show you off to Mad Murkle! Come along Dimpie.”

She started walking away, beckoning Arthur. Arthur stared at her for a second or two, then set off for where Ford had exited the parking garage. Before he’d gone two steps however, he felt a hard collar being quickly snapped around his neck and he was brought up short by a slight tugging. He turned to find the beaming woman pulling on a lead attached to the collar which was now around his neck.

“Now see here!” began Arthur, but that was as far as he got before a jolt of electricity shot from his neck down his spine to his genitals and back up to his brain, where it did five or six laps before exiting his mouth with a sound something like “wawwghhkkk!”

“Now come along Dimpie,” said the woman, tugging on Arthur’s lead again. Arthur, who had collapsed to his knees after being zapped, noticed that the woman was moving a finger toward a button on the end of the lead and decided that it would be easier and much less painful to go along with her.

“Good boy!” said the woman, and led him through the parking garage until she came to a small shack built out of towels that were so old and foul that they could be used as boards, which is what they were currently being used as. Arthur hardly had time to marvel at the all-towel construction methods used to build the once-multicolored shack (now mostly a uniform mottled gray-brown) before he was tugged in front of a bearded man dressed in oversize boxer shorts snugged all the way up to his armpits and held in place with a small set of rainbow suspenders (which were also now mostly a uniform mottled gray-brown) who was crouched in front of the hut.

“Good morning Murkle!” said the woman with a little too much chipperness in her voice. “Lovely day, isn’t it?”

“For our product. Do you know what we make here, Arthur? Do you know what product was made back on your home planet that no other planet in the entire galaxy seemed to be able to get right?”

Arthur looked below him. “Bread?” he guessed.

“Beer,” said Slartibartfast. “A whole planet, dedicated to making one product. Beer. 281 varieties, to be sure, but still just the one product. It’s amazing how your little planet, with its wobble and spin and moon and specific distance from the sun... All these odd things came together to produce just the right climate to make beer. And no one else in the galaxy can do it as well as us, Arthur. No one.”

Arthur thought about all of the other things that had been made on Earth and realized that, for almost all of them, a cheaper, better, more ergonomically comfortable version could be found somewhere else in the galaxy. But yes, the Horse and Groom did serve up a good pint.

They were flying over the English Channel now, approaching France, or what on Earth would have been called France. Slartibartfast was explaining how all of the continents had been split up into sections, and everything was just a combination of letters and numbers now. Arthur wasn’t really listening. He’d thought of something that his old Earth had produced that couldn’t be made better anywhere else. Fenchurch. He wondered where she was now.

as a pet. Therefore what i've done must be civilized."

"Gotcha there!" said Umplebeet to Arthur.

"But i'm a human being!" protested Arthur, since he couldn't think of any logical way out of his predicament.

"Being what?" said Murkle.

"Just... being," said Arthur. "A human being."

"Well, you have to be being something," said Murkle. "Can't be being nothing. I'm being the Lord of Garage City right now, although i might give that up next month. Nodwedge here is being the wealthy woman about town who everyone goes to for help and she gives advice to them, but no money."

"It's true," said Nodwedge, smiling and nodding slightly.

"Umplebeet here is being himself."

"It's humbling," said Umplebeet, bowing.

"So what are you being, orangutan-boy?" asked Murkle, poking Arthur with a popsicle stick again.

Arthur stared at them all in disbelief. "You're all mad," he said.

"I think he's being an ape," said Umplebeet.

"Orangutan!" insisted Nodwedge.

"I... AM... A... MAN!" shouted Arthur. There was a slight pause as they all looked at him. Finally the silence was broken by Nodwedge.

"Oh look! He thinks he's people! Isn't that sweet!"

Destroy planet Sol 3 ('Earth'), Sector ZZ9-Plural-Z-Alpha, to make way for construction of J3462 Interstellar Bypass.

That one had taken even longer, due to the fact that the blerky little planet kept popping back into existence, even when his fleet of constructor ships had quite thoroughly destroyed it. Eventually though, through a lot of annoyingly complex maneuvers, and dealing with many people he did not like, Prostetnic Vogon Jeltz was able to once-and-for-all get rid of that blerky little planet and put a checkmark next to that task on his list.

That brought Prostetnic Vogon Jeltz to the last task on his list.

It wasn't a very complicated task. In fact, it was mindlessly simple, and Vogons generally preferred things that were both mindless and simple. But this mindlessly simple task had caused Vogon Jeltz to lose his appetite, his desire to write poetry, his job, and occasionally his sanity. He wondered if today was going to be one of the days he'd go mad or not.

The list sat in front of him, like it always did. He read the tasks he'd completed, saw the neat checkmarks next to them, and felt good. A small voice in the back of his brain asked "has that last task always been there?" This was a question that he thought about a lot. He seemed to remember a time when the destruction of that blerky planet in Sector ZZ9-Plural-Z-Alpha was the last thing on his list. But at the same time, hadn't the next item also always been there? His brain hurt, as it had for a long time.

Finally, Vogon Jeltz read the last item on his list and then went mad for the rest of the day.

Do not check this box.

“Whatdya got for a hangover?” he asked the pleasant-looking gentleman behind the bar.

“Oh! A nice warm spiced cudlew-beast milk frappe might do the trick!” said the bartender brightly. “We just got a supply of cudlew-beast milk in recently and it’s—”

“Not what i had in mind,” interrupted Ford. “Let me put it this way, whatdya got to keep a hangover going?”

“Well, yurf milk with a splash of diffle seed extract, perhaps? Or maybe gink beetle milk, straight up, that has a good kick. I could add a shot of holabingi pepper juice to it, does that sound good?”

“Er, no,” said Ford. “Say, you wouldn’t happen to have *beer* in this part of the galaxy, would you?”

“Oh no,” said the bartender. “This is a dry planet.”

Ford froze. He tried to wrap his brain around what he thought he’d just heard. He couldn’t.

“I’m sorry, could you repeat that?” asked Ford.

“This is a dry planet,” said the bartender.

A thousand million brain cells in Ford’s head tried to grasp this concept and after a few nanoseconds of discussing it at length, a thousand million brain cells in Ford’s head all simultaneously shrugged their metaphoric shoulders. That can hurt. Ford winced and shuddered slightly.

“this is a bar, isn’t it?” asked Ford.

“Oh yes,” said the bartender. “It’s a milk bar. Finest in the county. Over 28 varieties of cow alone!”

Except for the wince and shudder, Ford hadn’t moved since the words “dry planet” had slipped out of the bartender’s mouth. He continued not to move. The smiling bartender continued to stand in front of him until a soft “boop” emitted from a blue screen on the wall behind him. The bartender turned and touched the screen.

“Hello, Planck’s! Where we serve you with udder delight!”

Ford barely had time to retch at that line before feeling overwhelmingly compelled to dive noisily to the floor, scattering barstools everywhere. What compelled him to suddenly do this was the appearance of the face of Fonk on the formerly blue screen, who was now

Marvin’s head.

“Um, Mr. Robot?” said Squinkles.

“I could sing you a different one,” said Marvin. “I’ve written 638,482 of them.”

“Nobody cares about your stupid songs!” squeaked Squinkles, stamping his foot. “Now, i’ve waited a very very long time for the ultimate question and i’d like to know if you have it. Do you?”

“Yes,” said Marvin, sullenly.

“Good,” said Squinkles. He sat back on his haunches, savoring the moment of anticipation.

“You’re not very nice,” said Marvin.

“I don’t have to be nice!” snapped Squinkles. “I’m about to become extremely rich!” He pulled out his little box with the small button on it. “I’m sorry Fonk, but nobody else can hear this but me.”

He pressed the button and everything went black.

wasn't at all pleased with his partner's uncharacteristic cleverness. "Anyone could come running out of a bar matching his description!" he said. "We have to make sure it's him."

"Fine, do it your way," said the first Vagon, who's name happened to be Nnngk.

Ergo turned to Ford. "Now, you Ford Prefect?"

"Er, no. No," said Ford. "My name is, um, well, it's not so important what my name is, it's important what it isn't, right? and it isn't Fudd Poifett or whatever you said."

"Ford Prefect," said Nnngk.

"Yeah, him," said Ford "Nice name. Probably a very dashing fellow. Have you tried in the bar?"

"No," said Ergo. He stared at Ford for a few seconds in what might have been mistaken for a drunken stupor but was actually just thinking. It made his head hurt.

"I don't think you're telling the truth."

"Oh, i am!" said Ford, folding his arms in front of him, nodding his head, and blinking. "Scout's honor!"

"Guess it's not him then," said Nnngk. "Good. I haven't killed anything in days."

Ford looked at the large, ugly, and quite lethal Kill-O-Zap gun which had suddenly appeared. The operational end of it was in what could only be described as the hand of Nnngk and the business end of it was pointed directly at Ford's forehead.

"You see," said Ergo, "we're under strict orders not to hurt or even kill Ford Prefect. Just bring him back to the boss. But anyone else we find, we can do with what we like. And what we like is to shoot things."

"Yeah," said Nnngk, nodding vigorously and jabbing the point of the Kill-O-Zap at Ford.

"So if you're not Ford Prefect..." began Ergo.

"Ohhhhhh! Ford PREfect," said Ford. "I'm sorry, i thought you said Ford PERfect." He smiled as genially as he could at the two Vagons.

"So your name is Ford Prefect?" asked Nnngk, enunciating each

started banging on the window. Fonk looked up at Ford, smiled, waved, then went back to fiddling with the machine. Whatever Fonk was planning on doing, Ford was pretty sure that at least one of the participants below wasn't keen on it, and he'd promised Arthur to look after her. He glanced around the room for something to smash the window with before realizing that he had a very handy window-smasher right in his hand.

"Sorry, Marvin," said Ford, as he heaved Marvin's head through the window.

"No, you're not," said Marvin gloomily, as the window shattered around him and he plummeted to the floor of the operating room.

Fonk spun around at the sudden unwelcome crashing noises and dove for his Zapissimo. By the time he reached it, however, Ford had landed, broken his leg, and collapsed into a whimpering heap.

"You mustn't let him interrupt!" Squinkles was shouting. "I need that question!"

Fonk leveled his Zapissimo at Ford.

"Wait!" shouted Ford, while clutching at his broken leg. "You don't have to take her brain!"

"We're not taking it out," said Squinkles. "We're just emptying it. You can fill it back up again when we're done."

"No!" said Ford. "Marvin! Marvin read Arthur's brain! He said it's impossible to know both the question and the answer at the same time."

"Mr. Prefect," said Squinkles, "Arthur Dent's brain was not encoded with the final outcome. This brain is. I suspect that we will get a proper question this time. Now, if you will excuse us, i'd like to get on with it."

"But isn't there some other way?" said Ford, pounding his fist on the ground to try to ignore the pain in his leg."

"What would you have us do, Mr. Prefect?" said Squinkles, putting his arms on what may or may not have been his hips. "Build another computer the size of a planet? Let it run another six billion years? Just hope that it doesn't get destroyed again? No, this is the only way."

Chapter 9

If one were to punch the words “dry planet” into the friendly screen of the Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy, it might display all sorts of useful information about a variety of arid, desert-like, or even completely waterless planets, how to find them, what to do if you find yourself on one, and most importantly, how to get off of them. But the Guide, in all of its magnitude, will not come up with the name Fred. And if one were to type the name Fred into the friendly screen of the Guide, it would not display the fact that the planet Fred is a dry planet. In fact it would not display much at all. The planet Fred carries the distinction of having the second-shortest entry of all planets listed in the Guide. The shortest entry belongs to a small blue-green planet in sector ZZ9-Plural-Z-Alpha called “Earth”. That entry is “Mostly harmless”. The entry for the planet Fred boasts one more word: “Not worth it.”

Fred is unique in the galaxy in that it is the only planet ever formed that was capable of supporting intelligent life but no intelligent life ever developed. It has no moon, so there are no tides to stir the oceans. It’s orbit is perfectly circular. It has no wobble on its axis. It’s not highly volcanic. In short, it is a very very stable, smooth planet. The highest form of life that ever developed in its billions and billions of years of existence was a sort of miniature clawless koala-like creature who has no natural enemies, eats healthy foods, and dies of natural causes.

Large interstellar development firms landed on this unremarkable little planet and discovered that it was a very pleasant place to live, it was centrally located, and it could support all manner of industries. In fact, they couldn’t find anything wrong with it. This invariably scared them off because they all assumed that if they couldn’t see anything wrong with it then there must be something *very* wrong with it that they just couldn’t see yet. Knowing that no insurance company would ever cover a development in a place like that, they all left.

Chapter 58

Arthur stood on the low hill in the West Country of England where his house should have been. Judging from the views and general topography, he was fairly certain that he was in exactly the right place. The only problem was that there was no house. Well, that wasn’t the only problem. There was also no road, no village, no surrounding farms, no light poles or power lines or anything. Just fields and fields of wheat, as far as the eye could see.

He had been standing there, contemplating this scene for quite a while when a small runabout popped up over the horizon and sped toward him. It circled him once, then settled down on a strip of grass between two cultivated fields. A door swung open and a figure stepped out and waved at Arthur.

Arthur walked over to the runabout, and when he got close enough to see the man standing in its doorway, he knew that this was not Earth at all, but just another planet that looked exactly like it. The man stepped down to the ground.

“Hello!” he said. “Oh, it’s you! Hello, Arthur!”

“Hello, Slartibartfast,” said Arthur with a sigh.

Chapter 10

Fonk stood in his office and looked out over the rolling landscape of the planet Fred. Being in charge of the Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy meant getting to do a lot of things, one of which was moving the building if you felt like it. And Fonk had felt like it. He chose to relocate to Fred specifically because of its very short entry in the Guide, and he made sure that that entry didn't grow or change. As far as Fonk was concerned, the fewer hitchhikers wandering around the place, the better.

Fonk didn't really have that much against hitchhikers as a whole. In fact, he quite admired their spirit of adventure. He'd just found that a large percentage of them (somewhere between 98 and 100 percent, in his estimation) arrived at the Guide building in a very unwashed state and too many of them were always trying to "become one" with something—nature, the sun, the Guide building, an iguana, or very often, each other. He found himself wishing that more of them would become one with the sun in a much more literal way.

So Fonk stood, content that the employees of the Guide were getting their work done with fewer interruptions, and watched Ford Prefect being marched up to the building far below him. After a few minutes, the door of his office buzzed open and Ford walked in, trailed by the two Vogons, Kill-O-Zaps in hand.

"Hello again," said Fonk politely to Ford.

Ford couldn't think of anything appropriately witty and insulting so didn't say anything.

Fonk looked past him to the Vogons. "Thank you gentlemen. You may go."

The two Vogons stood there, Kill-O-Zaps at the ready.

"And by 'gentlemen'," Fonk clarified, "i mean you two. You may go."

The Vogons looked disappointed that they didn't get to shoot any-

"Er, no," said Squinkles, "but you may have met two other mice, who—"

"I have," interrupted Trillian.

"Ah yes," said Squinkles, turning to Trillian. "Miss Trillian. I'm sorry that you didn't take me up on my offer all those years ago, but in a sense, it all worked out better this way."

"What offer?" asked Ford.

"He wanted me to quit my job," said Trillian. "Said he could make me fabulously rich."

"And you didn't take it?" said Ford and Zaph simultaneously.

Trillian glared at them. "No," she said. "My work was important."

"What did you do?" asked Fenchurch.

"I was a reporter," said Trillian. "I reported on everything, from everywhere, whenever it happened."

"Yes, and all of your time-travelling reporting was wreaking havoc with the very constants of the universe," said Squinkles. "Something had to be done."

There was a silence as everyone stared at Squinkles.

"Fortunately, there was a certain Vogon who wasn't happy with the fact that people kept escaping the planet he was supposed to have wiped *completely* out, so that set up the opportunity to set things right again." He paused to look meaningfully at Ford and Trillian.

"That's where Fonk here comes in," he continued. "It was his engineering expertise that allowed us to reverse-engineer a stable universe again. Time-travel is, of course, still possible, we've just made it very very very expensive to do so."

"Does that mean that we're going to have to worry about the Vogons trying to exterminate us again?" asked Ford.

"Oh no," said Fonk. "I arranged it so that the Vogon in question will have something else to occupy his time. I doubt he'll ever bother you again."

"So if that's done," said Ford to Squinkles, "why are you here?"

"Oh, i've gone into business for myself," said Squinkles. "I've started my own religion, you see, and i plan on giving everyone the answer to life, the universe, and everything."

Ford could tell that Fonk *really* wanted to tell him all about it and even though he was slightly curious, he didn't really want to give Fonk the pleasure since Fonk hadn't given *him* much pleasure since he'd met him. Although, he *had* given him three drinks, which had helped him immensely. And now that he thought about it, getting Fonk to babble on about corporate politics would give him time to think of another way to escape.

"Sure," he said.

Fonk looked at Ford with a small smile on his face. "One of the things i've always enjoyed about you, Ford, is your succinctness. The Guide employs thousands of writers of one kind or another, but not one of them match your ability to sum up the essence of a particular place in such an elegant economy of prose. I find it quite refreshing, especially compared with some of the other metaphor-happy researchers on our staff." Fonk sighed. "They could all take a lesson from your succinctness."

"Thanks," said Ford, succinctly.

"Case in point," said Fonk, tapping a button on the elevator panel which brought it to a smooth stop between floors. "Now," he said, eyeing Ford quite seriously. "I am going to tell you something which very few people in the universe know about."

"Oh yeah?" said Ford, becoming slightly more interested but still acting like he wasn't.

"Yes," said Fonk. "You and very few other people have had interactions with a unique version of the Guide. One that manifested itself as a sleek, black, and highly intelligent bird."

Ford's interest had now risen quite a lot, but he idly scraped non-existent dirt from his fingernails in an attempt to look completely disinterested.

"I designed that bird," said Fonk, pausing as Ford abandoned his pretense of indifference to stare at Fonk with a new-found awe. "It was a pity that i had to design it out of existence, but it was, as you discovered, a very dangerous thing. For the Earth, for Zarniwoop, and almost for you."

"Almost?" said Ford, recalling that the last thing that the bird had

Chapter 56

Arthur had roamed all through the giant spaceship and had found no one. He accessed the ship's computer and, after a few uncooperative minutes, managed to coax the computer into giving him some information by spouting off some mumbo-jumbo about deactivating its core memory that he remembered from the movie *2001 - A Space Odyssey*. The computer seemed suitably threatened and informed him that Fonk had teleported down to the surface, although it wouldn't tell him where.

With no other information to go on, Arthur made the decision to teleport down to England. He could see if his house was still there, then catch a ride into London to see if he could find Fenchurch again. After much explanation and pointing at maps, which were curiously devoid of any cities, towns, or roads, Arthur managed to convey to the computer exactly where he wanted to be teleported to, which he hoped would be right in front of his house. He stepped into the teleport chamber and in the blink of an eye and a total inversion of every bodily organ, he found himself on a familiar low rise in the West Country of England.

rewards and challenges than... well, i'm rambling. The point is, the Vogons took over control of the Guide and put us to work building their new little multi-dimensional time-irrelevant Guide, which we did."

"Now, the thing about Vogons is that they are very meticulous in their completion of a project. If there are 29 things on a checklist, they will complete and check off all 29 items. But, and here's the other thing about Vogons, they won't check off anything *more* than that. So once we built the new Guide, they tested it out to be sure that it would do everything that they wanted it to do, and it did and they were quite satisfied. But can you guess what else it did, that they didn't bother to find out about?"

Ford looked up at Fonk, smiling down at him. Despite the previous headache, followed by the three drinks in rapid succession, he felt that his brain was working rather well.

"Well," he said, thinking it out, "i'm here."

"Yes you are," said Fonk. "You and two other people, in fact. The Vogons specifically wished for you not to exist, as you should have been on Earth when they blew it up the first time. So the new Guide made you not exist. But after just enough time for a certain Vagon to check you off of his list, my little Guide performed one of its last buried tasks and made you exist again. And here you are. Anything else?"

"It made you the boss," said Ford.

"Right again," said Fonk. "No reason for that one, really. I just wanted the job, so i reverse-temporal engineered myself into it. I quite like it."

"So what about the Vogons? I thought that they owned this place now."

"Oh no, they never actually *owned* the Guide. They just ran it for a time. We still keep quite a few of them on staff since they are so good about doing exactly what you tell them to do."

"Ah," said Ford, actually understanding what was going on a little bit now.

"So now that we've covered the how and the what," said Fonk, starting up the elevator again, "it's time for the why."

Chapter 55

Rob McKenna loved his job. He was the Chief Irrigation and Hydration Officer for the Beeble Brewing Company. He got to work alone, which he liked, he got to see lots of foreign lands, which he also liked, and because he could fly a spaceship at enormous speeds through the atmosphere, he could outrun the rain, which he liked more than anything else.

In his old job, Rob McKenna drove a truck, and no matter how fast he drove it, he could never outrun the rain. And it always rained. He used to wonder why it was always raining wherever he went, but now he knew. He was a rain god. This information had been given to him by a robot he met on a space station and he wouldn't have believed it except for the fact that he was on a space station talking to a robot when by all rights he should have been on the M4 outside of Swindon. He was, in fact, on the M4 outside of Swindon one morning when it began to rain harder than he'd ever seen it rain in his life. It went past the thudders and the swampers, and on to the holy hells, and then, well, then it got a bit strange. It stopped being rain and looked to Rob McKenna to just be water, completely surrounding his truck. He felt like he was in a giant fishbowl and he could vaguely make out objects outside of it, but couldn't tell what they were. Then he started to float as if he were weightless and he became aware that there were basically three things outside of his fishbowl: The sun, a large, round, white thing, and a larger, round, blue-and-green thing, which seemed to be surrounded by a lot of little yellow things. Then there was a big flash of light and all that was left was the sun, the round white thing, and the little yellow things, which seemed to be zooming away into the dark. Then the round white thing faded away, as if he was hurtling away from it very fast, and the sun got smaller and smaller until everything was black and he was alone, floating in the cab of his truck, surrounded by a bubble of water.

Chapter 11

Arthur Dent was thinking. He'd been paraded around the parking garage and at one point had made the mistake of asking "Could i have some tea?". Now that was all he was allowed to say and he was prompted to say it about every three minutes. The problem was that no matter how many times he said it, no matter how earnestly he expressed himself, and no matter how delighted everyone was with the phrase, it never got him any tea.

So he sat, hunched over, staring out at the tidepool of hitchhikers, thinking. He thought about his home on Earth. He thought about making Perfectly Normal Beast sandwiches and Old Thrashbarg. He thought about Fenchurch and how much he missed her. He thought about living in a cave on prehistoric earth and how even that was preferable to living here in Hitchhiker's no-man's land. He thought about Zaphod Beeblebrox and Trillian and the Heart Of Gold and Krikketers and Slartibartfast. And then he thought about Ford Prefect and he had an epiphany. Of course! It all made perfect sense! He, Arthur Dent, was dead. He had died, probably run over by a bulldozer, and now he was descending through the levels of Hell. And his personal tour guide to Hell, the one who's arrival always signaled the next step down to a new and more dismal level of his own personal living death, was Ford Prefect. Who was this Ford person anyway? How long would it be until Ford appeared to whisk him away from the hell he was in now to a new, more unpleasant one?

Arthur thought about where Ford might be at that moment.

Chapter 54

Arthur Dent stood on the observation deck of the massive interstellar cruiser that he and Fonk had apparently just hijacked from the spaceport orbiting the planet Fred. He was trying to work out exactly what had happened, but it had all happened so fast. It seemed to involve a lot of Fonk's eerie-looking arms gesturing and pointing and hurrying Arthur along, and he was fairly sure that both threats and money had flown about liberally, and before Arthur knew it, he was being hustled onto this massive cruiser with Fonk's only explanation being "it's fast."

And fast it was. Arthur felt that he'd hardly had time to contemplate his current situation when there was a soft "bing!" and a soothing voice announced the imminent drop from hyperspace. Arthur sat down, buckled himself in, took a few deep breaths, and closed his eyes.

When his brain had returned to his head after its brief but nauseating voyage aboard his largest toenail in a sea of fur-covered oversized eyeballs, Arthur Dent opened his eyes and gasped. He'd seen the medium-sized blue-green planet that was suspended in space out the window from him countless times, both in pictures and in real life, and in numerous different realities and dimensions, but every time he saw it, there was a small pang in his heart, because no matter what the planet ended up being or not being, it still looked like home.

Arthur stared down at the planet with equal parts hope and fear. Hope that this in fact was the real Earth, and fear that it wasn't. Fonk had said that he knew where Fenchurch was. Could this be it? Would everything suddenly be back to normal and he and Fenchurch could settle back down on Earth?

The giant spaceship that Arthur was on appeared to be parked in orbit above the mid-Atlantic. Arthur could make out the African coastline, which looked much greener than he remembered. He saw the Iberian peninsula and the Mediterranean Sea and noted that it seemed

niture, and at least 24 of the known chemical elements. Ford offered explanations for each charge, such as “I was temporarily blind at the time” or “You can’t back down when negotiating a sale with a Julpinian, no matter how much it escalates.” But most of his explanations fell into two categories: “That was an accident” and “I just really really wanted it.”

Fonk sat patiently throughout this, tapping his fingers lightly together and making occasional “hmmph” noises at some of Ford’s more creative explanations.

“That’s an impressive array of charges,” said Fonk, after Glemus had finally finished quizzing Ford about everything on his list. “I’m assuming that you have the means to reimburse us, don’t you? After all, most of these charges were not approved by the Researcher Relations Department, and that would make you, Ford, personally responsible for them. Will you be paying in one lump sum or will we have to put you on a very large installment plan for the rest of what we hope will be a very very long life?”

Ford had been staring at the ceiling for so long that he was finding it hard to focus on anything else, but the slow dawning that his beloved company was actually going to make him *pay* was starting to sink in. He sat up.

“Now look,” he said. “As a researcher for the most fantastic book ever in the history of the universe, i feel that it’s my job to represent it as the galactic-class organization that it is. And if that means greasing a few palms, wining and dining clients, er...”

“Overthrowing dictators?” suggested Fonk.

“Well, you can’t sell Guides in an unstable economy, can you?”

“Perhaps not, but there is a fine line between ‘representing the company’ and ‘taking the company for all it’s worth.’ And you, Ford, are light years into the ‘taking’ side. I’m truly in a quandary as to what to do with you. You are, after all, one of our best researchers.”

“One of?” thought Ford to himself. He made a mental note to stop by Researcher Relations and find out who those other “best” researchers were. A few well-placed phone calls should take care of them.

that i should give them something that my father never gave me.”

“What’s that?”

“A very large inheritance.”

“No, what’s that sound?” said Trillian. “It sounds like someone knocking.”

Zaph looked over at the side door of his office, which he knew was triple-empregnated with Damp-O-Skin sound shielding. He walked over to it and, sure enough, heard a faint knocking sound, which meant that someone was probably pounding on the door for all he was worth on the other side. He opened the door and Ford Prefect and the head of Marvin the robot tumbled into his office. Four steps behind them in the hallway were two Vogons with laser pistols leveled at where Ford had just been standing.

Zaph looked at the Vogons. “May i help you?” he asked courteously.

“Official business,” said Ergo.

“Ah,” said Zaph. “And what is this official business?”

“We’re here to get Ford Prefect,” said Ergo, pointing his gun at Ford, who was crouched up in a vain attempt to hide behind Zaph’s metal legs. Zaph glanced down at him.

“And what do you plan to do with him, once you get him?” asked Zaph.

There was a long pause. Ergo looked at Nnngk, who looked back at Ergo. Ford peeked out from behind Zaph, who stood, smiling at the two Vogons. Trillian was watching everything from her chair. Marvin looked up at Zaph and said “Oh, there’s my body. I was wondering where that was.”

After a small eternity of uncomfortable silence, Ford hopped up to his feet, strode out of the office to face the two Vogons, and put his hands in the air.

“Well,” he said, “you got me.”

The two Vogons blinked very slowly.

“Yes,” continued Ford, “it was a valiant effort, and you prevailed. You got me. Thanks for your part. A job well done. You can see the receptionist for your parting gifts. I’ve got to run, now, so once again,

circles a few times.

“Could be,” said Ford with a shrug.

Squinkles stopped running in circles and stood up on his hind legs, staring intently at Ford. “I’ve come a long way at great expense to talk to you. Fonk here wouldn’t hesitate to shoot you dead on the spot if i asked him to.”

“He’s right, i wouldn’t,” said Fonk with a small smile.

Ford looked at Fonk, then back at Squinkles. “OK, so you want to find the ultimate question to the ultimate answer to life, the universe, and everything. How do i fit in?”

Squinkles sat back on his haunches and nibbled his cracker. “You’re going to get it for us,” he said.

happy?” said Marvin out loud.

“What?” said Nnngk, looking at the very tall, shabbily dressed robot that had just stepped out of the room that he was getting ready to blast the door of.

“No, no!” whispered Ford. “That’s what you say to *them!*”

“Oh, have we started?” said Marvin.

“Started what?” asked Ergo, waving the business end of his laser gun at the robot’s chest, which was actually Ford’s face. “Did you see a man running through here?”

“I think the man you’re looking for has left the building,” whispered Ford.

“I think the man you’re looking for has left the building,” said Marvin flatly.

“Did he now?” said Ergo “And how would you know?”

“Put some effort into it Marvin, or they’re not going to believe you,” muttered Ford.

“Put some effort into it Marvin—” said Marvin.

“No, don’t say that!” hissed Ford.

“Who’s Marvin?” asked Nnngk.

“No, don’t say that,” said Marvin.

“Say what?” said Ergo.

“What’s that hissing noise coming from your chest?” asked Nnngk. he took a step toward Ford/Marvin.

Ford turned and ran, barely keeping Marvin’s head on top of his own. Ergo and Nnngk watched him run off.

“Strange robot,” said Ergo.

“Yeah,” said Nnngk. He turned away from the fleeing robot back to the closet door in front of him, which he blasted to splinters with much glee.

“Come, Dimpie,” said Nodwedge, tugging on Arthur’s lead. “They haven’t seen you down on Level 2 yet.” She lowered her voice and leaned in toward Arthur’s stomach, thinking that that’s where Arthur’s ears were. “And no one down there’s ever seen a tmik-tmik!”

Chapter 52

Ford tore through the lobby of the Beeble Brewing Company with the two Vogons, who could move surprisingly quickly when they wanted to, squelching along behind him, firing their Kill-O-Zaps quite indiscriminately in all directions. This was creating a lot of noise and conveniently opening up large holes in the walls, which Ford lost no time in escaping through. After a few ticks of maneuvering past an assortment of very surprised office workers, Ford found himself in a hallway, sprinted down it, chose a door at random, and disappeared through it.

Ergo and Nnngk stepped through the rubble of a newly blasted wall into the now-deserted hallway. They looked both ways, then stood there, trying to think where Ford might have gone. Thinking was not something that Vogons in general liked to do, nor were they very good at it, but it took Ergo and Nnngk a few ticks to remember this, so before they remembered it, they stood in the rubble-strewn hallway with almost painfully blank expressions on their faces.

The door that Ford had randomly chosen happened to lead to a small storage closet which was dark, cluttered with junk, and had no way out other than the way Ford had come in.

“Belgium!” Ford muttered under his breath. He shifted around in the cramped space and his foot bumped into something hard and round on the floor. He was still panting slightly from all that running for his life stuff that he’d just experienced, and he couldn’t quite tell, but he thought he heard someone say “ow.” He turned to listen at the door and in doing so, bumped into the heavy round thing at his feet again. This time he was almost positive that he heard someone say “ow,” and it seemed to be coming from inside the closet where he was currently hiding.

Ford ran his hand along the wall of the closet until he found a light panel. He tapped it with his finger and a warm light filled the

truly be considered a legitimate catch of a tmik-tmik, since it lasted approximately 2-tenths of a second. It may very well have lasted longer but for the fact that the hunter, who's massive weapon had initially startled Mr. Hooger, had instinctively discharged the said weapon, thereby rendering Mr. Hooger into a fine pulpy ash, while the tmik-tmik swooped away, tmik-tmikking casually at the hunter, who fired off 10 or 20 more rounds to no avail (except to level a small town on the next hill).

The Hooger incident spawned a whole new method of tmik-tmik hunting. It was theorized that the only possible way to catch a tmik-tmik was to be actively involved in the process of *not* trying to catch a tmik-tmik. This theory in turn spawned a whole new industry devoted to equipping tmik-tmik hunters with suitable cover stories, such as leisure cruises, interstellar deliveries, and running for local elections, all the while armed with secret hidden snares to catch a tmik-tmik in the event that one might show up. These methods were even less successful than the direct methods, but plenty of people still went out tmik-tmik hunting in one form or another and this made a lot of people in the tmik-tmik hunting supply industry very happy and very rich.

Chapter 51

Fonk sat in his office, brooding. All of his carefully engineered plans seemed to be ripping apart at the seams, all because stupid people didn't do what, by all reasoning and statistical mathematical projections, they *ought* to do. He was beginning to have less and less patience with the dimtwits of the galaxy (of which there were an inordinately large amount), and Squinkles was having less and less patience with him. Where were Ford Prefect and Fenchurch Pan Dowdy? He drummed his fingers on his desk. The intercom booped.

"Zaph Beeble on the line for you, Mr. Fonk."

Fonk pressed a button and an image of Zaph's head appeared over his desk.

"Hello Zaph," said Fonk. "How's the beer business?"

"Hoopy!" said Zaph. "How's the Guide business?"

"Excremental."

"Hoopy! Say, Trillian's here and she's decided she wants her brain back."

"Trillian's there?"

"Yeah, flew in yesterday."

"Did she bring your other half with her?"

"Yep. Od's here too. Off getting ripped with Ford Prefect."

"Ford's there?"

"Yeah, he came in a week or so ago with some Earth chick."

"Fenchurch?"

"That's her name! You know her?"

"Not as well as i'd like," said Fonk, smiling in a very satisfied evil-genius sort of way, which Zaph either didn't recognize or didn't care about.

"So anyway," said Zaph, "about this brain stuff—"

"Zaph," said Fonk, interrupting, "I haven't been out of the office in a while, why don't i come over and we can all sit down and talk this

down on your fat little piggies, everyone had an inexplicable change of heart, decided that you weren't so bad after all, and sent you off into retirement at a country villa with a huge government pension. That would feel pretty good, wouldn't it?

That's about how Ford Prefect felt. He opened his mouth to say something cool and nonchalant but all that came out was "Hhhhhhhhhghhkk...", after which he hiccuped, burped, coughed, and sneezed all at the same time.

Squinkles cocked his head and watched Ford's momentary spasm, then turned to Fonk, who shrugged. Squinkles looked back at Ford, who now seemed to be vibrating slightly with a somewhat stupefied grin on his face, and continued. "Now, as you can see, i'm putting up an extraordinarily, stupefyingly large amount of money for this, so i expect you to bring this brain back to me *intact* and in a fully functioning condition. Anything less and i'm afraid that your accounts will have to be turned over to a collection agency."

Ford blinked a couple of times, and seeing how his capacity for voluntary blinking had returned, he decided to go for broke and attempt verbal communication again. "Hoopy," he said.

That seemed to have worked, so he kept going. "Very hoopy. Really amazingly fantastically hoopy. Just super-duper way out gargantuanly—hey, wait a second, you do realize that the Earth was blown up, don't you?"

"Oh yes," said Squinkles.

"More than once," added Fonk.

"that is why," said Squinkles, "you need to get there *before* it's destroyed."

"The first time," added Fonk.

Ford blinked a couple more times. "OK," he said, "i time-travel back to Earth, grab the guy with the big brain, time-travel back here, hand him over to you, zappity-poof, no more accounting problems. You've got your brain, everyone's happy. Piece of cake!"

"Yes, perhaps we shall have some cake when you finish your task," said Squinkles, "but unfortunately, time-travelling to the ZZ9-Plural-Z-Alpha sector, when you need to be there, has become prohib-

"I didn't realize it was a matter of belief."

"What you don't realize could fill a hollowed out star or two."

"Well explain to me then, how God and i could have met on two separate planets at two separate times without it being a coincidence?" said Arthur, a little annoyed at Lucifer's disdainful attitude. "Have you been following me?"

"Oh right, because that's what modestly intelligent immortal entities do, you know, spend time following around barely evolved species-centric dimtwits whose entire contribution to the evolution of the universe can be summed up with the equation $x = 0$."

"Now wait a minute," said Arthur. "When i was back on Earth, i participated in the creation of several public service spots for the BBC, and—"

"Where are those spots now?"

"Um, they were destroyed with the rest of the Earth i guess, but—"

" $X = 0$."

Arthur glared at the picture of the llama and finished his tea in silence.

After another half an hour or so, Lucifer announced that they'd arrived at planet Fred. Arthur had been busy trying to think of things that he'd contributed to society, but hadn't come up with much.

The ship glided down through the atmosphere and touched down smoothly outside the large H-shaped building of the Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy. The door popped open and the steps slid out to the ground.

"Get out," said Lucifer. "Don't come back."

"Where's, um, God?" asked Arthur. "I feel i should thank him for the ride."

"Oh, he takes forever in the bathroom," said Lucifer. "Of all the things i hate about him, that's one of the things i hate the most. And why should you thank *him*? I'm the one you flew you here. Miserable sponge..."

"Well, thank him for the tea, then."

"I mean, it's a simple matter of evacuation of waste, why does it have to be an epic sitting every time? I just hate it. Hate it, hate it, hate it."

Chapter 16

Arthur Dent was, at that moment, thinking that he should never have left the stairwell. At least in there he was living in an environment that had definite boundaries that he could understand. True, he would have eventually starved to death, but at least he would have died a free man. At the moment his status of being a man at all wasn't even being considered by the group of various humanoid and more blobular creatures standing around him arguing. Some believed that he was indeed a tmik-tmik, as Nodwedge currently claimed. Others were skeptical and thought that maybe he was a genetic experiment of some kind. One greasy-faced bipedal camel-man-thing was convinced that he was an amphibian and kept spitting water on him.

As they did so often when Arthur felt lost or helpless, Arthur's thoughts turned to tea. He thought about how nice it would be to be sitting down to a nice hot proper English tea. It was one of those things that he had the most trouble finding in the galaxy, as nearly all other civilizations apart from Earth (and Earth was questionably civilized at best) didn't find that soaking shredded, dried plant leaves in boiling hot water was, by any stretch of the imagination, a nutritious, tasty, or even sane thing to do. In fact, in some parts of the galaxy, soaking dried leaves in water that was even slightly above room temperature was considered an act of war. On Drobit 8, nearly half the population was wiped out during an intense drought when dry leaves kept falling into people's sun-warmed bird baths. Since the people of Drobit 8 were a particularly bird-loving people, they decided that, to avert further wars, all leaf-bearing plants would have to be destroyed, since they were wholly unwilling to give up the bird baths. This, as you may imagine, destroyed all of the native bird population's habitats and wiped out most species of birds. And since the people of Drobit 8 subsisted mostly on leafy plants and birds, they all starved to death, leaving behind a huge variety of the most well-crafted bird baths in the

Chapter 50

"Oh yes, you're quite alive," said God. "Do you remember the last time you were dead?"

"Er, well, no," said Arthur. "I just remember waking up from being dead. I was in a stairwell."

"You see? Dead people don't remember things," said God. "What did i just ask you a minute ago?"

"Um, you asked who Ford was."

"Yes, i did. And you answered by asking me if you were dead, but since you remembered what i asked you, you're obviously not dead. And since you're not dead, i'm going to ask you again, who's Ford?"

"Oh," said Arthur. "Er, Ford is..." He paused, not sure exactly how to say that he thought that Ford Prefect was his own personal harbinger of doom. He paused in the middle of his pause to reflect that he didn't even know if Ford was alive, since the last time he'd seen him, Ford had just been unceremoniously shot by a Vogon.

"Is?" prompted God.

"Oh," said Arthur, startled back to reality. "Well, actually, i'm not even sure if Ford is or isn't at the moment."

"I see. Or perhaps i don't." God shrugged and turned toward the small galley. "Would you like some tea and toast?" he asked, pulling a large loaf of bread out of a cupboard that Arthur was pretty sure didn't contain anything edible when he'd searched through it earlier. He frowned, then remembered with a pang that he hadn't brought any of the three delicious varieties of food from the planet Tiofftu with him. He sighed, sat down, and watched God slice the delicious-looking bread into thick slices.

"So where are we off to, then?" asked God.

"well, i was on my way to the planet Fred when i got stranded," said Arthur. "I was trying to rescue someone, although i fear that i may be too late now."

What was not comforting was the inescapable fact that Arthur Dent's own personal bellboy of doom had pushed his way through the crowd and was now standing in front of him.

"Arthur!" said Ford. "Time to go. Places to be, lots to do, things are looking up, pack your bags, oh, you don't have any bags, all the better."

"Excuse me," said Nodwedge, stepping up to Ford, "but i believe that Dimpie here belongs to me now, and i'm afraid that we have a very busy schedule planned."

"Yes. Great. Fine. Good. Look over there!!" Ford pointed behind Nodwedge, grabbed Arthur's arm, and set off in the opposite direction. He stopped after a couple of steps when he realized that, while it was usually fairly easy to get Arthur to follow along after him, no matter where he was going, this time there seemed to be an empty space in Ford's hand where Arthur's arm had just been.

Nodwedge, who hadn't bothered to turn around to look at whatever fictitious thing Ford had pointed at, gave a little "hmmpf" noise. This was followed by a sort of "splud" noise as the runaway air buggy that had been sailing directly at Nodwedge (and which Ford had kindly, if hurriedly, pointed out) hit her solidly and sent her sprawling across the floor, where she made some smaller and more painful sounding "hmmpf" noises.

"Right. Well, i did warn her," said Ford, watching the air buggy spin lazily off like a cue ball that had served its purpose in pocketing a steadfast nine-ball (in this case, Nodwedge). "Let's go."

"No," said Arthur.

Ford stopped in mid stride and was so surprised by what he'd just heard that he tried to turn around without finishing up the stride that he'd stopped in the middle of. This maneuver produced an ungainly arabesque, resulting in Ford winding up sitting on the floor facing Arthur, so his original goal of turning around was accomplished, just very ungracefully. Ford stared at Arthur. Arthur stared defiantly back at Ford.

"I'm sorry, what?" said Ford.

"No," said Arthur, feeling more sure of himself. "I'm not going with you."

Chapter 49

Ford woke up with a headache. He'd been doing this far too often lately and he made a mental note to stop having headaches, especially in the morning. As his thoughts cleared, he remembered that he'd been playing some sort of drinking game with Od Brox, although he wasn't sure why Od was here. For some reason, Ford seemed to think that he and Od had gone swimming at some point during the game. He opened his eyes to find that he was sitting in the fountain in front of the galactic headquarters of the Beeble Brewing Company. Od was unconscious in a hedge nearby.

Ford closed his eyes again and listened to the breeze rustling the leaves of the trees around him. He listened to the birds chirping and the fountain splashing and the muffled sound of webbed feet walking across the flagstones around the fountain. He snapped his eyes open again and saw something that he didn't like. He closed his eyes one more time and took a few deep breaths, hoping that what he saw was just a hangover-induced hallucination. But upon opening his eyes for the third time, he was forced to admit that indeed, there were two Vogons standing at the edge of the fountain. Two very familiar-looking Vogons. They looked back at him in a way that made Ford realize that he probably wasn't hallucinating them.

"Ford Prefect?" said Ergo, pointing his Kill-O-Zap at Ford's midsection.

Ford saw his chance and lunged at it. "No," he said, standing up and making a show of dusting himself off with the utmost dignity, even though he was soaking wet. "My name is Austin Mini. I believe that this Ford gentleman has retired to Stavromula Beta. Why don't you try looking for him there?"

He sloshed his way over to the edge of the fountain, stepped out, and proceeded to walk as casually as possible toward the front doors of the Beeble Brewing Company. He only broke into a run after a very

pool of hitchhikers living in their own grime and towels. He looked at the dazzling Sup-R-Sun radiant lighting systems that kept everything starkly, antiseptically bright and artificially cheery. He looked at Ford, who stood amid this scene with a casual comfort and edgy eagerness that seemed light years apart from the squalor of the moment.

“Right,” said Arthur. “Let’s go.”

“Super!” said Ford, whipping out the Laz-O-Blade from the Altarian Army Multi-tool and nipping off the collar around Arthur’s neck. He dropped the tool back in his brand new travel bag and slung the bag over his brand new shirt. Arthur noticed that everything on or hanging from Ford seemed brand new and he thought about this as he followed Ford out of the parking garage.

Chapter 48

Ford Prefect was, at that moment, sitting in the tasting room of the Beeble Brewing Company, tasting his forty-fifth beer of the day. Since he considered it a moral necessity to finish any beer that had been opened for him, he was quite rippingly drunk.

“Now this one,” said Ford. “This one is what is... this one is... it is.” He said this with all the finality and conviction he could muster, while wavering in his seat and attempting to focus on the person sitting across from him, but not succeeding.

“Yeah, it is, isn’t it?” said the person across from Ford, who seemed drunk as well, but it was hard to tell, since, although his face was a bit plastered-looking, his body still maintained every appearance of being in full control. This was probably because his body from the neck down was smooth, shiny, and made of metal, while his head used to be the second head of Zaphod Beeblebrox.

“I think beers will like this people,” said Ford, then he hiccuped and collapsed onto the floor. Zaph Beeble looked down on his drinking partner, giggled, then got up and walked out of the tasting room. His metallic feet echoed off the walls of the corridor as he strode smoothly back to his office. He was glad that Ford had popped in to visit, but it had been over a week and, while he thoroughly enjoyed Ford’s company, he did have a company of a different sort to run. He stepped into his office and gazed out over the cliffs to the azure sea sparkling off in the distance. It was a grand view, but he was thinking that it might be time to move the offices again. Where was it that his Chief Operations Officer kept raving about? Somewhere up North, he seemed to remember.

The intercom beeped. “Mr Beeble? there are two people here to see you.”

“Do they have names?”

There was a short pause. “Yes, they do.”

expression that Arthur had on his face a good proportion of the time.

“Read the book, Earthman,” said Ford, tapping Arthur’s brand new copy of the Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy.

Arthur flipped the Guide open and tapped the screen, which glowed warmly in his palm. He punched in “lunch” and immediately a list appeared, detailing all of the best places in the galaxy to have a nice lunch.

“Top of the list, Arthur!” said Ford as he slung his traveling bag over his shoulder.

A relatively short while later, Ford and Arthur were whizzing out of the atmosphere of the planet Fred at what Arthur considered to be a reckless, death-defying pace. The various alarm lights and buzzers which were encouraging Arthur to grip his seat in terror were merely annoying Ford and he was increasingly spending less time actually piloting the craft and more time trying to figure out how to silence all of the alarms, which of course caused more alarms to go off, which made Arthur grip his seat even tighter and made Ford finally stop piloting altogether and start flipping switches randomly until, in a grand confluence of timing, the alarms silenced, the lights stopped blinking, and the spaceship gyroed itself into a smooth flight path away from Fred.

“Piece of cake!” said Ford, relaxing in his seat and spinning it around a few times.

Arthur eased his death-grip on his seat slightly and watched as Fred diminished away in the window in front of him. It didn’t take him much time at all to realize that something in what he was seeing didn’t seem right.

“Um, Ford...” started Arthur.

“Yep?” said Ford, still spinning his chair around.

“Why are we flying backwards?”

“Only way to fly a PEE-Coupe,” said Ford, reversing the direction he was spinning.

just spoke. After a few seconds of agonizing pain and trying to get his head into a relatively vertical position, Arthur found himself looking at a wiry white-haired old man who was tidying up the pamphlets that Arthur had taken out, as if Arthur’s presence there was perfectly normal.

Arthur stared at him. “You!” he managed to say, but for the moment that was all he managed to say.

“Hello,” said the man, smiling down at Arthur, who was still on the floor, clutching his knee.

Arthur struggled to his feet. “Y–You...”

“Yes?” said the man, still smiling.

“You’re that man who used to sit in the corner at the Horse and Groom! You didn’t say much, but i always thought that you were quite witty.” spluttered Arthur.

“Hmm,” said the man. “Oh, yes, the Horse and Groom. Earth, was it? Not the best food, but good conversation. Good beer, too,” he added, as an afterthought.

“But what are you... How did... What...” Arthur trailed off, not sure where to start.

“Oh, but where are my manners?” said the old man. “Introductions! You’ve already met Lucifer, i see.” He leaned toward Arthur with a wink and a nod. “He thinks he’s evil.”

“Like you’d know anything about it,” said the llama, who’s name Arthur now understood to be Lucifer.

“And i’m God,” said the old man.

Arthur’s brain was not processing this as quickly as he’d have liked it to.

“God?” he repeated back to the old man.

“Yes,” said God.

“*The* God?” asked Arthur.

“Well, *a* God,” said God. “It’s just a name.”

Arthur stood there in the cabin of the spaceship with his knee throbbing and a nice old man he knew from the local pub on Earth, which didn't exist anymore, standing in front of him claiming that he was God and he had absolutely no idea what to do.

Chapter 18

The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy has this to say about the PEE-Coupe: The PEE-Coupe (Personal Extraterrestrial Excursion Coupe) was designed by the great zero-atmosphere designer of Bladoslab 4, Enervo Rrrch, famously known for his line of Safety Escape Capsule/Crafts (SEC/C, more commonly known as "Sexies"). He saw a need in the marketplace for a simple-to-pilot spacecraft that could take a family to a nearby moon or across the galaxy in comfort and ease. The result of his work was the PEE-Coupe, a lumpy, medium-sized, moderately nimble, and relatively safe space vehicle. Billions were sold, partly because they were idiot-proof, more likely because they were cheap, but mostly because they were aggressively marketed to every idiot in the galaxy, and they all bought one.

The PEE-Coupe proved itself to be as easy to fly as advertised, but it quickly became apparent to experienced pilots (none of whom had actually purchased a PEE-Coupe, but some of whom had been forced to fly one when their idiot friends were too incapacitated to even sit in the pilot's seat (which was almost all it took to fly one)) that there were so many safety warnings and alarms that the only way to fly one was in smooth and level flight. Perfect for dim-witted underclass picnickers, but horrifically annoying for anyone who could actually fly. Still, billions more were sold.

Since Enervo Rrrch's primary goals were simplicity and safety, he designed the PEE-Coupe with only a moderately powerful drive engine. But in order to make it more nimble than a brick and also be able to stop quickly, it was equipped with an array of side maneuvering engines, and one massively powerful retro thrust engine.

Eventually, some college kids who'd inherited their dad's old PEE-Coupes discovered that the PEE-Coupe could be flown at more than three times its original top speed, with more acceleration and maneuverability, if it was flown backwards. All it took was a minute or two

Chapter 46

Fonk stood on the roof of the Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy building and looked at his sleek orange spaceship. It was even sleeker than he remembered it since Ergo and Nnngk had forgotten that they were towing it when they landed on the building and managed to set their ugly yellow Vogon pursuit craft down right on top of it, squashing it quite flat.

"And where exactly are the passengers?" asked Fonk.

"Passengers?" said Ergo.

"Yes," said Fonk, trying very hard not to shoot the two Vogons next to him completely dead. "The two people who were flying this lovely spaceship when you captured it. Where are they?"

"There wasn't anybody flying it," said Nnngk.

"Ah. I see," said Fonk. "So this spaceship, this beautiful, beautiful spaceship, was just flying along by itself then, was it?"

"Yes," said Ergo, relieved that he was able to give a very simple answer, since he really liked very simple answers. His enjoyment of the moment was very short-lived however, since Fonk then proceeded to inform them of their unimaginable incompetence in a very very loud voice punctuated by laser blasts in various directions and many references to each of the Vogon's dubious parentages.

After he had shouted himself hoarse, Fonk took a few steadying breaths and closed his eyes.

"Now. I want you," he said, opening his eyes and glaring at Ergo and Nnngk, "to get." He paused. "Ford." He paused again. "Prefect." He steadied his breathing. "Is that very clear? Go get Ford Prefect and that Fenchurch woman he's with. You. Go get them. Now!"

Ergo and Nnngk both nodded and shuffled off to their ugly yellow pursuit craft. They were both very pleased that they hadn't been required to say much or been killed.

Chapter 19

Arthur closed the cover of his copy of the Guide and gazed out the window of the PEE-Coupe. He saw nothing but stars. He glanced down at the rear-view screen, which of course showed what was in front of them, and saw something besides stars. There appeared to be what looked like a child's pinwheel, only much much larger, sitting in space. It was lit up like a neon Christmas tree with all of the lights gently coaxing the eye toward the ominous-looking funnel of blackness at the very center of it.

Arthur was about to wake up Ford from where he was slouched in his seat napping when an atonal "ding!" from somewhere in the ship did the job for him.

"Lunch time!" Ford said, as he popped from his seat and began twiddling with buttons and levers.

"Um, Ford..." Arthur began, but before he could continue, the PEE-Coupe lurched around and a variety of alarms and warnings started sounding all at once. Ford was using both arms, a leg, and occasionally a shoulder to manipulate the controls of the spaceship in order to bring it around to what Enervo Rrrch would consider to be the "correct" flight attitude, but which most people now considered to be the "dumb" one. It was unfortunate that regulations required that all space crafts must enter time-portals going forward, because Ford would have just as soon flown in tail first, but that would have resulted in either a very long government inquiry or very quick vaporization or both, and Ford wasn't keen on any of those things. He managed to get the PEE-Coupe flying forwards again right toward the gaping maw of the giant neon pinwheel, to his relief and Arthur's increasing panic.

"Um, Ford..." Arthur began again.

"Yep?" said Ford, who had gone back to spinning his chair around in circles.

But before Arthur had a chance to inquire about what was hap-

wouldn't help him turn the ship's computer on and he was fairly sure that the Guide didn't care if it was being yelled at, but it made Arthur feel better. He screamed some profanities and yelled every nasty name for an inanimate object that he could think of. Finally he shouted "i just want to know how to turn the computer on!"

There was a low hum. Arthur looked up.

"Yes?" said a highly irritated voice.

Arthur looked all around him. "Hello?" he said.

There was a pause, then the voice said "Yes?" again, but this time the tone was as if it was talking to a two-year-old, as well as still sounding highly irritated.

A thought dawned on Arthur. "Are you the ship's computer?"

"I am a computer," it said.

"Oh," said Arthur. "Well, can you fly this ship?"

There was a long pause.

"Who are you?"

"Arthur. Arthur Dent."

"Do i know you?"

"Um, no, i don't think so."

There was another long pause. Arthur used this time to scan around the cabin to find something to look at. He felt uneasy talking to a voice that emanated from the walls without being able to look at who or what was talking.

"I don't like you," said the computer.

"Oh," said Arthur. "Well, perhaps if you got to know me—"

"No, i don't think that would help."

This wasn't going very well and Arthur was still uncomfortable talking to a disembodied voice, so he decided to address his comments to a small painting on the wall of some animal that looked like a llama. He cleared his throat.

"Are you still here?" said the computer/llama.

"Er, well, yes."

"Typical," said the llama in utter disgust.

"Yes, well, i was hoping that you might be able to, er, make this spaceship fly, um, into space..."

Chapter 20

Ford and Arthur strolled across the parking garage and into one of the many elevators scattered around the floor. Arthur found it odd that there didn't seem to be any sensation of moving up or down in the elevator. They stepped in, the door slid shut, they stood still, looking up for some reason for a moment (Arthur did anyway, Ford apparently took a brief nap standing up), then the door slid open and they were someplace else.

That someplace else was the best place Arthur had seen and smelled since waking up not dead. The air smelled of good food, it was brightly lit, and bubbles of happy conversation drifted in from the large restaurant just past the short hallway where the elevators were.

Ford exited the elevator and sauntered toward the restaurant, occasionally glancing down at something he'd pulled out of his bag. Arthur followed. When Ford got to the front of the restaurant where a variety of hosts and hostesses were greeting guests, he stopped and pretended to be searching in his bag for something, all the while looking at the gadget tucked into his palm every time someone walked by him.

"Er, Ford," began Arthur, "should we get a table then? It smells wonderful. I wonder if they have sandwiches. I could really go for a nice club sandwich with tomatoes and onions. That sounds delicious. I hope they have them. Fancy what you might be having, Ford?" Arthur paused his semi-inane staccato babbling to look at Ford, who was still acting conspicuously casual. "Ford?"

Ford casually kicked Arthur in the shin, but continued to stare at the device in his hand. Just then there was a small "bleemp" sound above them, followed by a smooth voice that said "Dent, party of two!" A small hover-bot came zooming around the corner and spun in place over the other groups of people waiting for tables. It had a glowing sign on it that read "DENT - 2."

could now extricate himself from planet dullsville. He sat down at the controls.

Arthur had flown in a lot of different spaceships, but he'd never actually flown one himself. He was hoping, what with all the advanced technology not available on Earth, that piloting an interstellar spacecraft would be closer to driving a car than to, say, flying a jet fighter, but he had a depressing feeling that it was going to be closer to the jet. He stared at the controls for a while. Shouldn't there be some sort of manual that tells you how to fly it? Arthur thought that there should, so he began to search for one. After half an hour of opening every cabinet and drawer he could find, he pulled open a drawer at the back of the cabin and found a cache of books, maps, and pamphlets. In among "Rid Your Ride of Rugglies," "The Twelve Things to See on Blemus Prime," and "E. Nillorack's Guide to Alien Languages in 116 Easy Steps" was nothing that looked like a spaceship user's manual, but there was a very old, worn copy of the Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy.

"Of course!" thought Arthur to himself. Why didn't he think of that sooner? He'd just ask the Guide! He pulled the Guide out of the drawer and flipped it on. He was deciding what to type to find out how to fly a spaceship when a short message appeared on the screen.

"Please wait for new messages," it said. Arthur didn't remember ever seeing the Guide display messages before. In a couple of seconds, the first message disappeared and a new message appeared.

Help us help you!

We've lost one of our researchers! Our colleague Ford Prefect has gone missing and we'd really like to find him. he may be travelling with one or both of the humanoids Fenchurch Pan Dowdy (no picture available) or Arthur Dent. If you see any of these folks, please give us a call or stop by the staff ofices! Thanks!

- Your happy friends at the Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy

Ford, meanwhile, was walking down between two rows of spacecraft, pointing the same device he'd had cupped in his hand at each spaceship that he passed. Arthur caught up to him at the end of the row, dabbing his nose with one of his Wonda-Towels.

"Ford," said Arthur, between dabs, "what are you doing? Don't we have lunch reservations?"

"Of course we have lunch reservations!" said Ford, heading down between another two rows of spaceships. "How do you think we got here? You don't just pop on down to the Big Bang Burger Bar without a reservation!"

"Well, when are we going to eat?"

"Eat?" Ford said, stopping for a moment to stare blankly at Arthur before returning to the device in his hand. "Oooh! Close!"

"Yes, eat. Some people find it necessary for sustaining human life. And what's close?" Arthur said, looking around him. "And what are you doing, anyway? What's that thing in your hand you keep looking at?"

Ford sighed and stopped. He realized that unless he addressed the issue at hand, i.e. Arthur's incessant questions, he was going to rapidly acquire a headache again, and he wasn't fond of headaches.

"Arthur," said Ford, holding up the device in his hand. "This is a Stell-O-Sens Time and Age Meter, calibrated to the growth rate of the universe, see?" He held it up for Arthur to see. On its screen was the number 0.00000000001.

"That number," said Ford, tapping the screen, "tells me where we are in the history of the universe. And since we're at the Big Bang Burger Bar, that number is very very low, because we're at the beginning of time. But if I point it at this ship here, it picks up the trace time-signature of when it came from, see?"

Arthur looked at the screen to see a much larger number. "So why—"

"Once we find a ship of the right when," continued Ford, cutting off Arthur, "and of the close-enough where, then we can, uh," he dropped his voice, "borrow it."

"Oh," said Arthur. "Then can we have lunch?"

Arthur frowned, turned around, and looked at the knife again. It was lying in the short grass with nothing around it but more short grass. Why couldn't he pick it up? If this was how his newly discovered madness was going to manifest itself, Arthur wasn't sure that he liked it.

He took a step toward the knife and stopped. It sat there. The sun shone. The breeze blew. Arthur took another step. All remained the same. It was after the third determined step that Arthur suddenly felt the overwhelming desire to pay attention to anything except what was directly in front of him. Look at how nicely the sun is shining! Look at that fascinating tomato plant over there! Didn't you forget to do something there behind you? Walking backwards is fun, isn't it?

Arthur tried hard to ignore all of the voices in his head and all the feelings he was getting to go anywhere except directly forward. And then a tiny voice in his head said "the only way to not die of boredom on this planet is to do what you least want to do." The thing that Arthur least wanted to do at that moment was to take one step forward. He closed his eyes, started deliberately humming some song in his head that he couldn't remember the name of, and stepped forward.

"Clunk!" his head ran into something very solid and he staggered backwards a couple of steps. He sat down on the ground, massaging his head. All the thoughts of doing something else faded away and everything looked normal. The sun was shining, the breeze was blowing, and the knife still lay in the grass in front of him. But now Arthur knew that he wasn't going mad like he'd hoped, but that there was definitely something there in the grass over the knife. And it was something that was quite plainly not his problem. He stood up, closed his eyes, put his hands out in front of him, and shuffled forward, whistling tunelessly. Just when he really thought that he should be checking on that uneaten half-a-tomato that he'd left out a couple hours ago, his hands came in contact with something cold and smooth. He opened his eyes and found himself looking at a nifty little spaceship, about the size of a small motorhome, parked neatly on the grass in front of him.

Arthur's first thought was "I wonder if they have any bread on board?" but then he soon realized that here was his salvation from iso-

Arthur's eyes lit up and the reaction that Ford had anticipated started to materialize. Ford acted quickly.

"Now, Arthur, I told you that to shut you up, so if you'll stay shut up, I can focus on finding the right ship to get you home, got it?"

Arthur nodded, and they set off down the rows of spacecraft, Ford poking the Stell-O-Sens at each ship and Arthur trotting along behind, imagining all the different lunches he would be able to have once he was back in England.

Arthur was still in high spirits a while later when Ford pointed the Stell-O-Sens at the last spaceship in the garage, looked at the screen and said "nope."

Arthur paused his happy imaginings. "Is that the last one?"

"No, Arthur," said Ford, as he headed back to the elevators. "Plenty of other garages where this came from!"

Arthur went back to his imagining (he'd switched from lunch to breakfast and was just thinking about a delightful meal of poached eggs on toast) and followed happily along.

When they arrived back in the entrance to the Big Bang Burger Bar, Ford went back to his surreptitious Stell-O-Sensing and Arthur stood there enjoying the smells of warm food drifting in from the restaurant. He noticed this time that there weren't really that many people waiting for seats. A group of people would arrive from the elevators, and within a few seconds, a hover-bot would whiz in with their name and number on it, announcing that their table was ready, and they would proceed on into the restaurant with a host or hostess trailing along carrying just the right number of menus.

Arthur was marveling at the efficiency of it all when Ford nudged him, indicating that they should follow a large group of boisterous humanoids back to the elevators. As he turned to go, Arthur noticed a hover-bot flying a bit lower and less steadier than the others. It seemed

Chapter 45

Arthur was extremely bored. Of all the planets he'd been stranded on, this one was by far the least interesting. The weather was the same, the terrain was the same, the sky was the same, the food was the same... The food was what annoyed Arthur most of all. Not because it was bad, no, the large leafy plants tasted like the freshest most nutrient-filled leaves of lettuce he'd ever had. They had just the right crunchiness and flavor. And the tomatoes were the most flavorful tomatoes he'd ever had in his life. Besides the fact that they were so large that he couldn't eat half of one of them at one sitting, they tasted nothing like the tomatoes he'd used to buy in the market back on Earth. Those tomatoes, when they were in season, were quite tasty, but nothing compared with a nice home-grown tomato from someone's private garden. But even a nice home-grown tomato paled in comparison to these giant ones (as long as there wasn't a sleetle in it). And then of course there was his source of protein, the flidge meat. It had taken Arthur some time to figure out how to catch the flidges and he'd eaten up his whole supply of condensed Nutri-Meals before he'd gotten the hang of it. After the accidental stabbing of the first one, he had no luck at all in capturing a second since all he had on him was the knife end of the Altarian Army Multi-Tool, and Arthur was a horrible shot. Finally he realized that the flidges liked to hover just behind him to watch what he was doing, so he took to wandering among the tomato vines, pretending that he didn't know or care that a flidge or two was following him. He'd take out his knife, tap on a tomato to see if it had a sleetle living in it or not, then casually toss the knife behind him as if he was through with it and just wanted to get rid of it. About once every ten or twelve throws he'd hear the unmistakable "thrrk!" of the knife making contact with a flidge. Oddly enough, sometimes the knife wouldn't even penetrate the skin of the flidge, but it would still drop dead with a look of utter surprise on its face.

Chapter 21

Of all the possible subjects to get any sort of advanced degree in at the galaxy-renowned University of Zelmud at Aritremus Double Beta Prime (“The Fightin’ Antiprotons!”), the most difficult to obtain is the ultradoctorate degree in extra-spatial inter-temporal parking. To even enter the ultradoctorate program, a student must have attained doctorate or supradoctorate degrees in interstellar physics, super-sub-quantum relativity, gross *and* minute temporal mechanics, paranormal statistics, and inter-galactic basket weaving. Due to the rigorous requirements, most ultradoctorate candidates die of old age before completing all of their studies. But the University of Zelmud still offers the program because of the severe shortage of extra-spatial inter-temporal parking engineers in the galaxy.

The central premise of extra-spatial inter-temporal parking is this: You own a business located at a fixed point in time. People from all possible points on a time-scale equal to the lifespan of the universe arrive at the same time for lunch. How do you park them all?

Many times during the history of Zelmud University, the board of regents has questioned why they offer an advanced degree that can be summed up in three sentences (two, if you’re lazy), and relatively short sentences at that. But after reading the sentences, deciding that it’s impossible, and then discovering that it is in fact possible, they realize that they’re on the board of regents because they have a lot of money and they’re not smart enough to be professors and if people want to pay to become extra-spatial inter-temporal parking engineers, why should the board of regents care?

In an odd coincidence, every time this question comes up at board meetings, the board usually votes to give itself raises and proceeds to take a long long vacation.

So in the blissful absence of oversight, the extra-spatial inter-temporal parking engineering department at Zelmud University con-

Chapter 44

Ergo and Nnngk were not bored at all. They were chasing a small orange spaceship and were very slowly gaining on it. This made them as happy as Vogons were likely to get because it meant that they were completing their assigned task, which is one of the things that makes a Vogon happy. To any outsider, it might look like what they were doing was incredibly boring, since the entirety of what they were doing was sitting and staring at the orange spaceship in front of them, and they’d been doing that exact thing for the past week. Vogons, however, lived their lives so very close to perpetual boredom that they didn’t recognize boredom for what it was, and thus were never bored.

“I think it’s getting closer,” said Nnngk.

Ergo pressed his fingers to his nose and squeezed his eyes shut. “How many times do i have to tell you?” he sighed. “It’s not getting closer to us, *we’re* getting closer to it.” he glared at Nnngk for a second, then went back to staring at the orange spaceship in front of them.

“It’s still closer,” mumbled Nnngk.

And it was closer indeed. The squat, square, ugly Vogon pursuit craft was nearly close enough to the formerly sleek, shapely, sexy orange spaceship that Ergo and Nnngk could do what they’d been wanting to do for a week now. Ergo reached over and pressed a button.

“You said i could push the button!” said Nnngk, looking slightly hurt.

“Well, it’s too late, i’ve already pushed it,” said Ergo. “You can push it next time.”

This made Nnngk happy and they both sat back and watched as a large claw-like apparatus shot out of the front of their ship, trailing along a very thin, but very strong wire. The claw soared out ahead of them. When it reached the battered orange spaceship, it closed itself onto one of the tail fins of the ship and the wire went taut. Ergo pushed two more buttons. Nnngk was too busy watching the scene in

Chapter 22

Ford and Arthur had now examined every spacecraft in The Big Bang Burger Bar parking garage about twelve times. Ford was trudging along, muttering “no... no... no... no...” and Arthur was plodding along behind him. He’d spent quite a lot of time imagining everything he could eat for lunch, breakfast, tea, and midnight snack before moving on to dinner and supper, which occupied him for 3 or 4 circuits of the garage, the elevators, the entrance to the restaurant, and back again. Each time they’d arrived in the restaurant, Arthur would look for his little hover bot, which by this time was rolling around in a small circle in a corner going “blurmp”, following by a pathetically feeble “Dent? Party of two?”

Arthur had no idea how the whole garage-elevator interface worked, but he noticed that each time that they arrived in the garage, the spots of dried blood he’d left on the floor looked different. Sometimes they looked like they’d been there for a few weeks, other times they were fairly fresh, and sometimes they weren’t there at all, although he was till fairly sure that they were in the same garage, as he was becoming more familiar with it than he really wanted to be.

Ford came to the last spaceship in the current garage and pointed the Stell-O-Sens at it. He read the number on the screen, sighed, and sat down on the floor. The thought that this had all been an elaborate trick to trap Ford at the beginning of time forever flitted through his mind. Arthur was currently inventing a new meal for every hour of the day and nearly tripped over Ford, who had pulled his primary Wonda-Towel out of his bag and was either thoughtfully or thoughtlessly chewing on the corner of it. Arthur could never quite get a good read on Ford’s attitudes sometimes. He sat down next to Ford and watched a large, sleek spaceship slide smoothly along the next row of ships and out towards the exit ramp.

“Say, Ford,” said Arthur, watching the ship slide by what looked

ers were on it unceremoniously into the air. Listening to the announcers, she came to understand that this was what they were referring to as “home field advantage.”

She and Ford sat down at a small table and looked at a drink list. Fenchurch had no idea what any of them were but Ford seemed suddenly fascinated by some of the drinks listed. He ordered two and when they came, Fenchurch took a sip and commented to Ford that her beer tasted very much like a Marstons Pedigree. Ford grinned and pointed at the label, which read “Beeble-Brau #61: Pedigree.”

“That’s where we’re going,” said Ford. “Beeble.” He jumped up and dashed back out to the shipping schedule board. After a couple minutes, he came back in and sat down.

“There’s an empty freighter heading back to Beeble in a couple of days. Well, thirty-one tocks to be precise.”

“Tocks?” asked Fenchurch.

“About an hour and a half, your time,” said Ford. “In most places, you use local time-keeping conventions, but on the spaceports they’ve all standardized to ticks and tocks.”

“And how long is a tick?”

“A little over twenty seconds, i think.”

“I see.”

“Anyway, i’ll meet you in front of dock gamma-5 in 30 tocks.” He finished his beer and stood up. “I’ll be in a bar.”

“You’re *in* a bar.”

“I’ll be in a better bar.”

True to his word, Ford stayed in various bars in the spaceport for the next 30 tocks playing drinking games for money and keeping himself happily inebriated. Fenchurch wandered among the many shops and stalls selling everything from babelfish to Zarquonian stumblepucks, which looked like harmless coasters with a miniature fern growing out of the middle of them, but which could apparently be trained to kill.

Fenchurch’s feeling of having a definitive answer to everything was becoming more and more like a dim memory during the next two days as she perused shop after shop of strange and fantastic things, and she realized that there was an enormously large amount of things to see in

“Yeah,” said Dinzy. “It sounded like it was coming from the door.”

They both looked at the door.

You don’t suppose it’s broken?” said Bloora.

“Nnnnnno,” said Dinzy, very unsure of herself. She knew that she should get back to work watching the monitors, but nothing like this had ever happened in the attendant’s booth before.

Arthur knocked a third time on the door. “Hello?” he called out over the wail of the alarms. “Is anybody there?”

Bloora and Dinzy couldn’t hear Arthur’s cries or the alarms, but they did definitely hear the knocking. They sat there staring at the door for a bit until Bloora said “Oh! Do you think there’s someone knocking on the door?”

“Oh yeah! That’s it,” said Dinzy. She nodded at Bloora and then went back to watching the monitors, satisfied that they’d solved the problem of the mysterious knocking and could get back to work.

Bloora sat there for a minute longer. Something was bothering her.

“Hey, Dinzy?” she asked.

“Yeah?” said Dinzy, not looking up from the monitors.

“Do you think we should see who’s at the door?”

Dinzy looked up from the monitors. “I’ve never opened that door before. Do you think we’re allowed to?”

“I don’t know.”

“Well, why don’t you look it up?”

“I’m on break.”

“Well, i can’t look it up, i have to watch the monitors.”

“Maybe when i get off my break i can watch the monitors for a bit while you look it up. Then you can go on your break.”

Dinzy paused to think about this. “Will i get my full break then?”

Before Bloora could answer, the door opened and Arthur peeked his head into the room. He had been waiting patiently outside the door and finally ran out of patience and simply tried the handle. It was unlocked, so he opened the door. To his relief, all of the automated alarm systems assumed that everything was now OK, and they all went back to standby mode.

Alpha and collect 100% of the cargo’s worth from an insurance company. Some people don’t end up getting their shipments on time, but everyone ends up happy and many people end up being rich.

The insurance companies, of course, were never pleased about coughing up the cost of an entire shipment of cargo, but they were keen enough to do business in plural-Z sectors as well and no matter how many tera-zillions of Altarian dollars they had to shell out to questionable shipping company claims, they always ended up making a lot of money.

Bloora and Dinzy looked thoughtful for a moment.

“Well,” said Bloora, “in an emergency, i guess we’d have to find the ship’s temporal transport number.”

“Would the prefix do?” asked Ford.

“Yes!” said Bloora. “Then we could just look at a list and you could tell us which ship is yours!”

“Slammy!” said Ford. He proceeded to spill out an enormously long series of numbers, which Bloora slowly and methodically punched into a keypad. She then touched a blue button and a short list of ship’s registries came up on screen. Ford scanned the list.

“Why, i think it’s that one!” Ford said, pointing to one of the entries.

Bloora highlighted the entry and a surveillance image of an ordinary-looking light blue short-hop stellar cruiser appeared on the screen.

“That’ll do, i mean, yes, that’s it.” said Ford. “If you could just direct us out to—”

“Wait,” interjected Dinzy. “We’re not supposed to let you out to this ship unless we’re sure that it’s yours.”

“Ah,” said Ford, thinking quickly how he might be able to get rid of these two parking attendants and somehow make it look like an accident.

Dinzy turned to Arthur. “Is this your ship?”

Arthur made a show of carefully looking at the image on the screen while Ford pretended to be not at all nervous.

“Yes, i suppose that it is,” said Arthur finally.

“OK, then,” said Dinzy. She punched her stubby fingers on the keyboard in front of her. There was a short hum, then a small token dropped out of a slot into a small dish. Bloora picked up the token and handed it to Ford, who grabbed it, thanked the two attendants profusely, and hustled Arthur out of the booth into the garage. Bloora and Dinzy sat there watching the door for a moment and basking in the afterglow of being able to help someone out.

“So, who’s turn is it to go on break?” asked Bloora.

wondered if it was always this chaotic. She looked over at Ford, who was sitting calmly with his eyes closed, apparently doing deep-breathing exercises.

“Um,” began Fenchurch, “how exactly should we be preparing ourselves?”

“Teleport,” said Ford without opening his eyes. “Try to relax.”

“Oh,” said Fenchurch, and she thought back to her days of taking yoga classes. She smiled at the thought of the wiry blonde yoga instructor who seemed keen on her even though he was married and she wondered what he was up to now, before realizing that he wasn’t up to anything as he’d almost certainly been vaporized along with the rest of the Earth. This thought soured her mind for a little bit, but then her intestinal tract inverted itself, wrapped her up like a cocoon, sang a brief bit of Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony, and deposited her in a padded room about the size of a phone booth. She wobbled there for a second until the translucent panel in front of her slid open, revealing a round atrium done entirely in industrial metal and surrounded by many more booths like the one that Fenchurch was standing in. She stepped out of her booth and saw Ford stepping out of a booth a few spaces down. He looked over at her and grinned. “Fancy some lunch?”

They exited the atrium under an archway on which were written the words “Welcome to Alpha Centauri - Please spend.”

When Arthur reconstituted, he opened his eyes (which seemed to be working as vision-centers again) to find that they were cruising smoothly through star-dotted black space. All seemed calm and as normal as space tends to be, but Arthur found himself thinking about the always-changing parking garage.

“Ford,” he said, “How does this temporal parking thing work, anyway?”

“It’s best not to know,” said Ford.

Arthur had cut into one of the tomatoes on his first day on the planet and was rather surprised to find that it didn’t contain juicy tomato innards, but a horrible gray and black slug/beetle (which Arthur subsequently named a sleetle, but was in fact known throughout this sector of the galaxy as a Common Gray-Black Winged Fruit Slug (this sector of the galaxy was not known for its creativity)). Arthur was so surprised by the sudden appearance of the sleetle that he flinched his hand backwards with such a violent force that his Altarian Army Multi-Tool, which is what he’d been using to cut open the tomato, flew out of his hand over his head behind him and with a somewhat satisfying “schlork!”, embedded itself in the gut of the second native animal on the planet, which dropped dead behind Arthur with a surprised look on its face. This second animal looked to Arthur like a cross between some type of bird, perhaps a chicken, a lung-fish, and a hedgehog. It had four stubby legs with wingish flippers on them and its coat was made of something that, if he was forced to describe it, Arthur would say was exactly halfway between feathers and fur. He wasn’t sure how the animal managed to fly, but it did fly, and Arthur most often found one or two of them hovering just out of reach behind him. He had decided to name these creatures flidges, although that wasn’t their name.

Arthur had eaten the first flidge because he didn’t think that it should go to waste, and he was hungry. He really wanted to cook the meat, but couldn’t find anything that would burn, so he finally resigned himself to eating it raw. He was pleased to find that raw flidge meat tastes remarkably like lean smoked bacon.

was bound to be a schism. The Ignism schism came when a group of uptight Ignates decided that “It’s best not to know” didn’t leave enough room for enlightened free will, so they changed the holy scripture to “It’s preferable not to know,” thereby empowering themselves and their followers to have a choice as to whether to know or not, even though they inevitably chose not.

In all the religions in all the galaxy, this was one of the only times when there was a major schism in a major religion (after all, one fifth of their entire bible had been re-written) and no one went to war and died because of it. Seeing that it was a pretty safe bet to create their own schisms, more sects started to split off. There were Hindigs (“There are many ways not to know”), the Buddigs (“Know not”), the Mafigs (“We don’t know nothing!”), and the Lutherigs (“It’s best not to know, but we’re going to work really hard at it anyway”). Most people stuck with basic Ignism though because, as far as crazy sects of religion go, for them, it was best not to know.

Chapter 40

Arthur Dent was having a frustrating conversation. The most frustrating part of it was that the two people he was conversing with were currently flying away from him in a spaceship while he, Arthur, was angrily standing on a warm piece of fertile ground on a cheery sunny day on some planet that he didn’t know the name of. The conversation was a bit one-sided since Arthur was the only one participating and his half consisted mostly of every dirty epithet he could think of, screamed in no particular order at the two people in the departing spaceship who’d just stranded him there and couldn’t hear him anyway.

After a while, Arthur’s voice gave out and he realized that it was pretty pointless to be jumping up and down and screaming at someone who was probably light-years away by now. He sat down and marveled at his ability to be stranded on barely civilized planets and although it didn’t seem as if Ford Prefect had been directly responsible for this particular stranding, he was sure that somehow or other, Ford was involved.

The trip had started out pleasantly enough. Smeerpap and Luwielooowhee had told him that they were on their yearly tmik-tmik hunting trip and were charmingly chatty about all of their previous hunting trips and the many times they’d almost seen or shot a tmik-tmik. They told him that this year they’d decided to use a new type of tmik-tmik bait and it was only after they’d landed on the particular planet that Arthur was currently stranded on that he came to realize that he, Arthur, was the bait. Smeerpap had at first asked him to stand in a particular place and when Arthur asked why, Smeerpap became much less charming and exhibited much more of the attitude that can be summed up with the phrase “stand over there or i will shoot you with this very large gun that i’m holding.”

Fortunately for Arthur, Smeerpap decided not to shoot him, but

“Arthur, this is important. We don’t have a lot of time.”

“We don’t?”

“No. So we need to get down there, find our passenger, and get back out before... well, we just need to hurry.”

“Why? What’s the rush? Where do you need to be?”

“Anywhere but here.”

“Ford, this is my home we’re talking about.”

“Not for long.” Ford checked the clock on the control panel and nudged the ship downward without slowing down much.

“What’s that supposed to mean? Why do i feel like i never know what’s going on?”

“Because you usually don’t.”

“What?”

“Arthur, you were born that way. You were born on a giant computer the size of a planet who’s sole purpose was to discover the question to the answer to life, the universe, and everything, and that computer got blown up just before completing its billions-of-years calculations, but apparently the answer, or rather, question, was stored in the brain of a single person on that planet and what’s amazing to me is that *you*, of all the people in the universe, are the only one who knows who that person is!”

“I do?” said Arthur, rather startled by Ford’s sudden outburst.

“So i’ve been told,” said Ford, as he eased the spaceship through the upper atmosphere and set an arcing course towards the British Isles. “So if you could perhaps tell me where to find this person, that’d save a lot of what we don’t have a lot of: time.”

“Ford, i don’t know anyone like that.”

“You don’t?” said Ford, letting the ship slide into a gentle roll.

“Of course not! I can’t see into people’s brains! Sometimes i hardly know what’s going on in my own brain!”

Ford stared at Arthur, dumbfounded, while the ship increased its roll and began a gentle wobble off course.

“Belgium! I was told it was someone you knew! Are you *sure* you don’t know anyone like that? Perhaps with an overly large head? Think, man!”

The ensuing laser gun battle was very bright, hot, and noisy, but not very long. As the echoes of the last shots were still bouncing around the rooftop, Ford led Fenchurch through the dust and debris into the hangar, which had quite a few large, smoldering holes in its sides. Inside the hangar, and with only a few scratch marks on it, was a very sleek, sexy, deep red-orange spaceship. It had rounded cowlings around its powerful engine ports and not one single extraneous thing was sticking out to break the clean lines from nose to tail. It was the kind of spaceship that, if it pulled up next to you, you wouldn’t care how much of a jerk the pilot was because the ship was so fantastically cool that it didn’t matter. You’d be happy just to be next to it in whatever piece of junk you were flying. And it would make your day, even if the guy who owned it was a self-centered middle-aged single engineering nerd with tons of disposable income who bought the ship simply because he could. It looked very fast.

“Wow,” said Ford.

“Yeah,” said Fenchurch.

“Argrablfft?” said the security door behind them, then it fell off its hinges with a thud.

Ford walked over to the spaceship. He almost hated to do what he was about to do, but in times of necessity, one had to do things that were a little unpleasant. He turned around and mule-kicked the spaceship, hard. He kept kicking it until he could get his fingers around the edge of one of the body panels, which he then pried off. He fiddled with some wires and switches behind the panel for a bit, and the door of the spaceship popped open.

“That’s quite a talent,” said Fenchurch.

“Design flaw on these ships,” said Ford. “They figured that no one would ever smash something so cool just to get by the security circuits and steal it because that would greatly lower the resale value.” He hopped into the ship with a grin. “But they figured wrong!”

Fenchurch climbed into the passenger seat of the small craft and the door swung shut and sealed itself. In a moment, the ship lifted off of its elegant landing struts and hovered in the air. Fenchurch looked around them at the inside walls of the hangar. The door ahead of them

visibility to the horizon. Ford interjected little “Mm-hmms” and “uh-huhs” to Arthur’s narrative, but wasn’t paying attention to the actual content of the speech. Finally he interrupted Arthur as he zipped the cruiser around the flight patterns of Heathrow.

“Where are we going Arthur? What address?”

“Oh, there’s actually a funny story about that—” began Arthur, remembering how he’d accidentally found Fenchurch’s flat.

“Street and number, Arthur!” said Ford, tapping his shoulder to indicate that time was critical. Arthur had no idea what this motion meant, but he quickly remembered the address and Ford punched it into the console, narrowly avoiding a 747 with a very surprised-looking flight crew.

“Not the only spaceship you’re going to see today,” muttered Ford as he screamed down some London streets, causing general mayhem below. In a couple of minutes, he came to a pleasant little square and dropped the ship down to land. Cars slammed on their brakes and swerved as the light blue spaceship settled on its pads right in the middle of the street, blocking both lanes.

“Er, Ford,” said Arthur, “don’t you think we should be a bit more, um, discreet about parking our spaceship?”

“Time, Arthur, time!” yelled Ford, as he popped the door of the craft open and leaped down the steps. A small crowd of people had gathered to gawk at the spaceship. Ford looked at them and said “Hi!”, then turned back to the ship and said loudly “Arthur! Don’t make me use my ray-gun on you again!” Arthur emerged from the ship while the crowd backed up three or four steps.

A few minutes later, Arthur and Ford were standing in front of the building where Arthur remembered that Fenchurch lived. No one appeared to be home and Ford was deciding how best to break into her flat. Arthur suggested that a more sensible plan might be to check local cafés and coffee shops since it was likely that Fenchurch was out having her morning coffee. They set off in opposite directions, Arthur strolling and thinking, immersed in the sights and sounds of his home, Ford running around like a madman.

Fenchurch landed in a very low dimly lit hallway. Ford pulled a lever on the wall next to him and they heard the desk drawer above them slide shut.

“How’d you know about that?” asked Fenchurch.

“I work here,” said Ford, setting off down the hallway at a slight crouch because of the low ceiling. “Zarniwoop had it installed in case he needed to escape quickly.”

Fenchurch followed Ford down to the end of the hallway where there was a small square door. Ford pulled it open to reveal a slight gap and then a second door of about the same size. He pushed that one open to reveal what looked like an elevator. They both climbed in.

“Hi, Ford!” said the elevator in an annoyingly chipper voice. “Where are we escaping to today?” Normally elevators already knew where their passengers were going and thrilled to get them there in the most efficient way possible, but when people get into an elevator who don’t know where they’re going, the elevator has to ask, which of course it is insanely happy to do.

“Does Fonk keep his personal spacecraft on the roof?” asked Ford casually.

“Yes he does,” said the elevator. “Would you like to see it?”

“Yes,” said Ford, and the elevator zoomed upward.

It was a very short trip, as they were already very near the top of the building, and when the elevator door opened with a “ding!”, Fenchurch and Ford looked out on a flat roof with a large, locked hangar on it.

“Have fun stealing it!” said the elevator as they stepped out onto the roof. It then slammed its door shut and dropped away down its shaft faster than gravity could pull it, acutely aware of the mayhem that was about to occur.

Ford looked at the hangar for a moment, then turned around and jabbed the button for the elevator. A small screen fluttered to life and a nasally voice said “access code, please.”

“Don’t have one,” said Ford. “Shoot me.”

“Very well then,” said the automated security door, and a small panel above the door popped open. A laser gun slid out of the open-

he want? And where did he get that beautiful blue and silver shirt? After a minute she realized that she wasn't likely to get any answers sitting in a cafe, so she gathered her things and went out to the street to see where the man had gone.

He hadn't gone far. Fenchurch walked down to the corner where the man was talking to another similarly-dressed man in the middle of the street. A crowd of people were watching them, but giving them lots of space. Fenchurch edged up to the front of the crowd and was debating whether or not she should just walk right up to them and demand to know what was going on when she saw something that temporarily made her forget about the crazy man yelling her name. Parked in the middle of the cross street, half a block down, and right in front of her building, was a large light blue thing which she guessed immediately, and quite correctly, was a spaceship. She began to think that maybe the crazy man did *not* come from a mental institution, but was only halfway through that thought when she heard her name again, this time from a different voice. She looked around.

"Fenchurch!" said Arthur in joy and surprise, pointing behind Ford.

"Yes, Fenchurch," said Ford. "That's who we're looking for, Arthur. But i don't think—"

"No, Fenchurch. Right there," said Arthur, still pointing behind Ford. Ford spun around.

"Fenchurch?" he asked.

Fenchurch realized that there was probably no way out of this now. She slowly nodded and the crowd not-as-slowly backed away from her, as if the fact that the spacemen knew her obviously made her contaminated as well, leaving her alone with the two spacemen in the middle of the street. Ford bounded over to her.

"Fenchurch Pan Dowdy?" he asked.

"Yes," said Fenchurch. "And you are?"

"Ford Prefect," said Ford.

"I see. And who's your friend, Austin Mini?"

"Ooh, she's a quick one!" said Ford, turning to Arthur, who'd just made it over to Fenchurch and was homing in on her as if she were a

"English," said Fenchurch. "From England. It's part of Earth." she added, seeing the blank stares of Fonk and Squinkles (or what she imagined was a blank stare from Squinkles, she couldn't really tell).

"So the question is...?" prompted Fonk.

"To be or not to be," said Fenchurch. "That is the question."

"Interesting..." said Fonk.

"No, no, no!" said Squinkles. "That can't be the question! To be or not to be? Forty-two. That doesn't make any sense at all! Maybe if it was 'How many times must someone be or not be?' Forty-two. But even that's questionably sensical! I mean, after you've not been, how is it possible to be again?"

"Yeah, Fonk," interjected Ford, whom the other three in the room had temporarily forgotten about, "how is that possible?" Ford had, after all, definitely not been and then been again, and while it wouldn't change his life at all if he knew how that was possible, it was still an interesting phenomenon. He looked at Fonk expectantly.

"Er, well, it's, uh, complicated," said Fonk.

"I'll bet," said Ford.

"Excuse me," said Squinkles," but i've waited an unfathomably long time for the question to the answer to life, the universe, and everything, and i don't think that any of you are approaching this with the seriousness it deserves!"

"How about," began Fenchurch, "'How many roads must—'"

"No, no, no, NO, NO!!" squeaked Squinkles, hopping up and down on the desk. "Now you're just making things up!"

"Well, how am i to know what question is the right question?" said Fenchurch. They all looked at her in silence. "Look, i got up, um, what i consider to be yesterday morning, or maybe the day before... Anyway, i was feeling odd, like something was sitting in the back of my brain and i didn't know what it was. So i started wandering around, thinking. Thinking about the big mysteries of life and why people felt the need to kill other people just for disagreeing with them and things like that. But i couldn't concentrate in London, so i thought i'd hop a train out to somewhere i'd never been, like Rickmansworth or somewhere like that, and i was on my way to the station but i decided to

“Aha!” interrupted Ford, making Arthur jump. “That explains it. You’ve never met her.”

“Yes i have, we—”

“No, Arthur. Different you, different her, different universe.”

“But we went—”

“No. You will not haven’t, if you want to be precise about it. Do you know what day this is?”

“It’s...” began Arthur, then looked around him. “No.”

“It’s a very special day in the history of the Earth, and right now, you and i are probably in your local pub having a last few pints. Ahhh, Earth beer... hard to find in the rest of the galaxy you know. Anyway, the point is, we’ve come back to when you and Fenchurch haven’t met. Simple as that.”

“We haven’t met?”

“Not until very recently.”

“You mean i have to meet her all over again?”

“I’m afraid it’s too late for that. You’ve already made quite the first impression.” Ford raised his arms up in an imitation of Arthur, who still had his out from his aborted embrace attempt.

Arthur dropped his arms to his sides and looked forlornly over at Fenchurch, who was watching him and Ford with a confused interest. Ford bounded back over to her with Arthur shuffling along behind.

“Right,” he said to Fenchurch. “We’ve all met, so if you’ll just go and climb into that spaceship over there, we can all go.”

Fenchurch looked at the light blue spaceship in the middle of the street. “Really?” she said.

Arthur didn’t look at the light blue spaceship. “I’m not going,” he said.

Ford stared at Arthur. “What?”

“I’m not going,” repeated Arthur. “This is my home, Ford. I don’t want to leave it again.”

“Arthur, do you remember what it was like being dead?”

“No. But it was probably much less painful than being here now. And if suffering is the human condition, then i’d like to stay here where i can be a human and suffer along with the rest of humanity.

the charges you incurred on this, er, mission.”

“Say, that reminds me of another thing,” said Ford. “My charge card stopped working.”

“Yes, well, as long as i am in charge of the Guide, and i *am*, credit will be extended to those researchers who actually do research.” He paused to let that sink in. “We can’t have you running around borrowing spaceships every day and then *losing* them, now can we?”

Ford slouched back down in his seat and didn’t say anything. Fonk turned to Fenchurch.

“Now, Miss Pan Dowdy, i must apologize for the rather brutish manner in which your appearance here was made possible, but it was unfortunately a necessity to ensure your presence. You are, after all, quite important.”

“Yeah, apparently there’s something in my brain that you want, right? Some great cosmic answer or something?”

“Question, actually. We already have the answer.”

“Oh, so it’s just a big intergalactic game of Jeopardy, then?”

Ford snorted out a laugh but Fonk looked less than pleased.

“I assure you, this is no game. There are very many important—” But he was cut off by what sounded like someone shattering a small, thin pane of glass, and Squinkles appeared on the desk in the office. He was dressed in a lime green tunic this time, with a purple fez on his head. Fenchurch was startled by the sudden appearance of a mouse out of thin air but had already started to get used to the fact that odd things happened when one wasn’t on Earth anymore.

“Ah! Squinkles!” said Fonk. “Your long wait is finally over. May i present to you Miss Fenchurch Pan Dowdy of Earth.” He gestured at Fenchurch, who waved meekly, still adjusting to the fact that Fonk was talking to a mouse in a tunic who’d just appeared magically out of nowhere.

Squinkles bobbed up and down on his hind legs, looking at Fenchurch.

“Oh, no,” he said. “No, no, no. This can’t be right. Her head is much too small.”

“That’s what i thought as well,” said Fonk, “but Mr Prefect has

strange events going on and the spaceships popping up all over, she decided that maybe this was what she was meant to be doing right now, so she climbed up the steps into the spaceship.

Arthur was about to follow her up when Ford came running up with a bar towel around his neck, toting a dolly piled high with cases of beer. What was most likely the liquor outlet proprietor was running behind him, shouting obscenities, but when he saw that Ford was about to load his beer into a light blue space ship parked in the middle of the street, he slowed down and decided that he wasn't going to push the matter.

Arthur helped Ford load the beer and they all climbed in and closed the door. Arthur surveyed the beer.

"Planning a long trip?" he asked Ford.

"Just stocking up, Arthur old chap," said Ford. "You can't find good Earth beer anywhere else in the galaxy! And this," he continued, tossing the bar towel to Fenchurch, "is for you. Don't lose it. You can get a better one later, but for now, that'll have to do." He ran over to the controls and fired up the engines.

"You know," said Arthur, "i feel the same way about tea. It's so hard to find good tea anywhere else but Earth. And Scrabble. Oh, and a good pub sandwich! Ford, do you think we could—"

"No time!" yelled Ford. He pulled a lever and the cruiser bounced into the air, hovering at about the height of a one-story building, then shot off down the street, once again adding to the general hysteria below. Arthur and Fenchurch grabbed a pair of seats while Ford piloted the ship down streets and avenues, slamming into ninety-degree turns that a vehicle that size really shouldn't be able to make, but somehow it was making them.

Fenchurch was holding onto her seat tightly and she looked over at Arthur, who had a death-grip on his. "Is this as high as this can fly?" she asked.

"Oh no, it goes quite a bit—" Arthur paused as the ship swerved through another ninety-degree turn, "higher."

"Gotta stay low," interjected Ford. "Vogons."

At that point the ship shot down a street, off the end of a pier, and

Chapter 39

Ford and Fenchurch sat in a small, dingy office on one of the lower floors of the Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy building. Ford was staring intently at the Vagon left to guard them with a look of extreme annoyance on his face. He'd found that this look, if cast upon certain people at social gatherings, usually got them to leave the room. It didn't seem to work on Vogons, but Ford was having a go at it anyway. Fenchurch just sat, thinking about what she didn't know about the galaxy two days ago.

The ride from Engreedle 5 to Fred had been fairly unpleasant. Ford of course had been unconscious for most of the trip so there wasn't much conversation to be had with him. This left the two Vogons, who Fenchurch tried repeatedly to engage in conversation or even to answer such simple questions as "who are you," "where are we going," or "why have you abducted me." But every attempt on Fenchurch's part met with blank stares from whichever Vagon she addressed.

So she spent the trip sitting and thinking. The enormity of the entire Earth being wiped out except for her and Arthur finally started to sink in, but on the other hand, looking at Earth's place in the awesome gargantuanness of the galaxy, not to mention the universe, made Earth's existence, or lack of it, pretty insignificant. She wasn't sure if she was comforted by that or not. In any case, she decided that she'd better learn how to get around the galaxy on her own without having to rely on being kidnapped from place to place. She was very glad that she'd decided to wear comfortable shoes on that last morning on Earth.

After a while of sitting in the dingy office, the second Vagon came in and waved his Zap-O-Matic at Ford and Fenchurch. "Let's go," he said.

They were marched out into the hallway where they were met by a chorus of "ding!"s as every elevator in the building opened its door. They rode an extremely happy elevator up to one of the upper floors

Ford at that point.

“You do know that the magnetic North Pole isn’t actually at the physical North Pole, don’t you?”

Ford whipped his head around. “What?” And just as that word escaped his lips, the ship clipped the first rogue wave in the North Sea. Ford whipped his head back around and quickly realized that he’d better fly a little higher but unfortunately the time it took for Ford’s brain to process that information and send a signal down his arm to his hand to pull back slightly on the controls was slightly longer than the time it took for the cruiser to hit the second rogue wave. At that point, like a smooth rock skipping over a pond, with each successive hit coming quicker than the last, the cruiser pretty much determined its own flightpath, despite Ford’s intentions otherwise.

Eventually, a stone skipping across a pond will slow down as the skips come faster and faster until it settles on the water’s surface for a brief instant before dropping through and plummeting to the bottom, as stones inevitably do.

While a smooth, sleek spaceship on the North Sea will behave very much like a smooth, sleek stone on a glassy pond while it’s skipping, the spaceship has the advantage of having some buoyancy, so when the light blue cruiser slid gently to a stop on the rolling waves, it didn’t plummet to the bottom as a stone would, but sat there like a big blue duck without a head or neck. This probably wouldn’t have been much of a problem for getting the ship up and flying again except for the facts that the engines had been ripped off and it was upside down.

“Belgium!” said Ford, looking up at the depths of the ocean below them. Arthur looked up as well, then off to the side, where there was slightly more light.

“Have we sunk?” he asked.

No. We’re upside down,” said Ford.

“Upside down?” Arthur echoed. “Then why aren’t we standing on the ceiling?”

“Grav-O-Mats, Arthur,” said Ford, cracking open a beer and leaning back in his chair. They heard the muffled roar and boom of a Vogon spaceship screaming by outside.

“It’s the safest way to travel, Arthur, you should know that,” said Trillian, as she turned back to the huge screen in front of her.

“And when you see Ford,” said Od, “tell him to stop by. We’ll have some Bleenian crispy-dip and splinter-fingers.”

Arthur stood there in the large room and was about to say something about how friends usually try to help friends out but then he realized that on all occasions, Trillian, with or without whatever piece of brain she was missing, and Od, with two heads or one, had never really been Arthur’s friends. In fact, most of the time they had been fairly unpleasant toward Arthur, when they even acknowledged him at all. He turned and marched out of the house.

On the patio, he pulled the Sub Etha Sens-O-Matic out of his bag. He’d seen Ford use one of these but he’d never actually used one himself. All of his previous hitchhiking had been from one well-populated area to another and so never required hunting for passing spaceships. He examined the Sens-O-Matic closely to see if it was obvious how it worked.

There really isn’t much to a Sub-Etha Sens-O-Matic. The O Company had made it, like most of its products, simple and efficient. There’s a small light which glows green when it senses a spacecraft in the area, and a sens-O-pad under the thumb can be used to change the desired number of hitchhikers to be picked up. Fortunately for Arthur, it defaults to one.

After examining the Sens-O-Matic, Arthur decided that it was either much simpler than he suspected or far more complex. There were no dials or indicators anywhere and he couldn’t even find a switch to turn it on. But he was determined not to walk back inside and ask Od or Trillian how to use it, so finally, he just gripped it with his hand on what seemed to him to be the back-end of the thing. To his delight, a small green light came on, just above his thumb. It seemed to be getting dimmer, but as he watched, it started glowing brighter again. “Now,” he thought to himself, “how do i actually make this thing work?” He remembered that Ford had held the unit out, almost as if he was actually standing by a road, hitchhiking with just his thumb and not a Sub-Etha Sens-O-Matic, so Arthur held the Sens-O-Matic out at arms length, thinking that this must look awfully fool-

“That was neat!” she said.

“Er, yes. Um, thanks,” said Arthur, but Fenchurch didn’t hear him as she was worming her way back into the spaceship again, laughing. Arthur watched her in surprise and admiration until Ford’s voice broke his concentration. He turned to see Ford standing at the edge of the spaceship, looking out into the water.

“Hello!” Ford called out. “Do you think you could help us out?”

“Arrr,” said another voice, the source of which Arthur couldn’t identify. “Looks like ye be in a bit o’ a quagmire, aye?”

Arthur walked across the gently bobbing underbelly of the spaceship to where Ford was standing and found that the voice was coming from a dolphin who was idling in the water with his head above the waves.

“Yes,” Ford was saying. “We’re in a bit of a hurry and could use a lift.”

“Arrr, mateys,” said the dolphin, nodding at Arthur to acknowledge his presence. “Why shouldn’t we be a-leavin’ ye to yer wat’ry graves, aye?”

“We’re on a very very very important mission,” said Ford. “Very very very. Right Arthur?”

Arthur stared at the dolphin. “How come you’ve never talked before?”

“Arrr, pay heed, ye lubber!” said the dolphin. “That fish in yer ear makes it clear, it does.”

Arthur, as he usually did, had forgotten about the babelfish in his ear. He was just about to say something about it when everything got very very quiet and a voice rang out in perfect five-million kilohertz clarity. A voice that sounded bored, ugly, and beaurocratic. A voice which would probably be the least likely voice to ever be used in a nature documentary narrative or any advertising campaign unless the goal of that campaign was to get people to *not* buy the product being advertised. It was a voice that Arthur had heard before, and he didn’t like it.

“People of Earth, your attention please,” said the voice.

“Er, look, time’s getting a bit short,” said Ford to the dolphin.

“C’mon, let’s go take all these dimtwits home.” He turned back to Arthur. “Monkeyman, you need a ride anywhere?”

“Well, yes, actually...” but Od and Trillian were walking away, discussing Od’s new hat and how cool it was. Arthur sighed and followed along.

The ride wasn’t very interesting. Arthur just sat and worried, and since he wasn’t acting very cool, everyone else avoided him, which was fine with Arthur. Trillian had managed to convince everyone that they were cool and anyone who didn’t think so wasn’t cool enough to know what cool was. She was amazed that she got paid for this.

Od’s chrome schoolbus/spaceship landed with a “wump” on the planet Bleen next to a crazy building with porches, stoops, verandas, patios, and sundecks everywhere. Everyone gathered on the largest patio where Od made a short speech praising all of the clients’ coolness, then presented each of them with a pair of sunglasses and a small towel with his picture on it. He then ushered them all out and they went back to their jobs as information processors and account specialists with the fairly useless knowledge that they were cool again, which they probably weren’t but no one around them was cool enough to notice. Od didn’t get much repeat business.

When the clients had all left, Arthur followed Trillian and Od into the house. A smooth voice welcomed them as they walked into the large room off of the main patio.

“Hello Mr. Brox and Miss Trillian. I see you have a visitor, will he be staying?”

“Dunno. Earthman, you staying?”

“Er, well, no, i was hoping that—”

“Nope!” said Od to the house.

“Very good sir. You have 36 messages.”

“Delete ‘em!”

There was a short pause, then a soft “ding!”

“Deleted. Will there be anything else?”

then decided that it wasn't worth it. The three of them stood there quietly drinking down their beers, waiting. Ford was pretty confident he knew what was about to happen. Arthur wasn't so sure. And Fenchurch had no idea.

Chapter 38

The great winged duck-billed fairy cupcake hovered in the inky blackness of space. Before it floated a partially evolved human creature, slowly coming out of a deep sleep. A curling tongue flicked out of the mouth of the fairy cupcake and spun the human lazily around. His eyes opened.

"Where am i?" he asked.

"You're in space," said the cupcake.

"How come i can breathe?" he asked.

"Good point," said the cupcake, and suddenly they were sitting on the floor of a desert with the sky all red and purple as the sun was setting.

"Now," said the cupcake, "what do you get when you multiply six by nine?"

"What?" said the man, noting that they were now sitting on a giant Scrabble board and he had turned into the letter A. Several tentacles burst out of the cupcake and spelled the word "BRIAN", which the man was about to protest about since proper names were not allowed, but when he looked again, it said "BRAIN." He pondered asking just what on or off Earth was going on when a giant half ladybug, half salamander leapt up over the edge of the Scrabble board and ate the cupcake, tentacles and all, in one bite.

"Arthur," it said, as it advanced in a slow, sidewise scuttle. "Arthur!"

Arthur tried to move or defend himself or just do *something*, but as he was a Scrabble tile, there wasn't much he could do. He felt a poke in his ribs, which he thought was odd, since Scrabble tiles didn't have ribs.

"Arthur," said the giant salamander-ladybug again, this time in a distinctly female voice. Arthur noticed that everything seemed to be fading away and he felt an overall soreness in places that Scrabble tiles didn't have, like feet and elbows and necks. He opened his eyes.

Curiously, the Gargox Corporation has never been found liable for any of these mishaps, most probably because the bulk of the income the Gargox Corporation generates for its shareholders comes from insurance holdings and it is one of the leading experts in the galaxy of writing non-indemnity clauses.

The reason that Grav-O-Mats are such a successful product is because the O Company has perfected the technology. It's really quite simple. Create a wormhole to an alternate dimension at a precalculated and stable distance from a very large gravity well (the O Company prefers burned out stars which haven't collapsed into black holes yet, thus eliminating heat-transmission problems). Fix in stasis the end of the wormhole that appears in our universe and encase it in a self-regulating and self-sustaining floor panel. Offer them in a variety of color and covering options.

The higher-end Grav-O-Mats (marketed under the brand Anton Graver's Deluxe Sens-O-Floors) have controls to adjust the G-force and temperature of the floor panels, but the standard Grav-O-Mats come pre-configured to any G-force the customer would like. This is why, for the ultimate in sensory congruity, the Grav-O-Mat is the answer for the modern spacecraft manufacturer.

throwing out a variety of loud and stacatto noises, many of which were most likely slurs as to the dubious parentage of the other bot. While this mid-air argument over which bot had jurisdiction over the snared body below them continued in ever-increasing screeches, that snared body was moving very very slowly in a way which would extricate itself from the snare-nets. Snare-nets, as Ford knew all too well, constrict tighter at any sudden movements, so the trick to escaping them is to play almost dead, but not quite.

The hover-bot's argument had escalated to a full-scale laser battle overhead by the time Ford carefully slid his last limb out from under the nets. But just as he did, a security cart slid up the concourse and stopped right by the nets.

"Hey, you!" said one of the two passengers in the cart. Ford didn't bother to find out if they were talking to him or not, but assumed that they probably were. He turned and ran, but the other passenger in the cart already had his Zap-O-Matic Self-Aiming Security Rifle out and in a snap of light shot Ford square in the back. Ford crumpled to a stop right in front of Arthur and Fenchurch.

Fenchurch looked shocked that someone had been shot in a public place right in front of them. Arthur looked shocked that *Ford* had been shot in a public place right in front of them, which he didn't think was possible as it always seemed that Ford could find his way out of any situation whatsoever, and usually alive.

Ergo and Nnngk stepped out of the security cart and waddled up to Ford's body. Nnngk kicked it gently. Ergo looked at Fenchurch and Arthur.

"Which one of you is Fenchurch Pan Dowdy?"

Fenchurch raised her hand weakly before Arthur had a chance to stop her.

"Right," said Ergo. "You're coming with us."

Nnngk reached down, grabbed one of Ford's legs, and started dragging him to the cart.

"Now wait just a minute!" said Arthur, stepping between Ergo and Fenchurch. "I won't let you."

"And who are you?" said Ergo, not really caring.

the lack of Earth while Ford did a slow backstroke. A small muffled pop interrupted them and a voice came over the ship's intercom system.

"Ahoy mateys! Welcome aboard! Apologies for the dank, but our ships t'weren't built for lubbers as yerselves. Set yer troubles free, we be droppin' yers off at Thumar 4 if that'd be aright fer ye'se."

"Hoopy!" said Ford.

"Arrr, then," said the voice, "keep yer noses up!"

"Swim fast and strong, my friends!" said Ford.

"What?" said Fenchurch. "Are we supposed to be swimming somewhere? What was that noise? Where *are* we, anyway?" She had imagined that her first trip into space would be a bit more thrilling and a lot less wet.

"We've been picked up by the dolphins," said Arthur. "They said that they'd drop us off at a place called Thumar 4, although i'm not certain where that is."

"You can speak dolphin?" asked Fenchurch.

"Er, well, no," said Arthur. "There's this fish in my ear, see, and, um..."

"You have a fish in your ear?"

"Oh, yes. Well, you sort of have to if you're going to travel the galaxy and communicate with people. Not everyone out there speaks English, you know."

Fenchurch had about a million questions and wasn't sure where to start. "Where are you guys from again?"

"I'm from a nice little town near London," said Arthur, "and Ford's from a nice little planet near Betelguese. At least i assume it's nice. I've never been there."

"Stunningly boring!" said Ford, doing the breast stroke. "But lots of opportunities for getting into trouble! You really should visit it sometime just to say you've been there if anyone asks."

"Ford spent some time on Earth before it was destroyed the first time," said Arthur.

"It's been destroyed before?"

"Well, technically, this is the first time it's been destroyed, but it's the third or fourth time for me."

"Let me try it again," said Arthur, reaching for the cup, but Ford snatched it away before he could get to it.

"Get your own!" Ford said, then he took another big gulp. "Yeah, definitely Pride," he said, after savoring the beer. "Uncanny."

"So what does that mean?" asked Fenchurch?

"It means," said Ford, "that either someone's been hoarding an awful lot of London Pride, or more likely—"

Ford was interrupted by the public address system in the stadium. A nice but businesslike voice announced: "Would Mr. Ford Perfect please report to Information Booth Nine. Ford Perfect to Information Booth Nine please. Thank you."

"Ford Perfect?" said Arthur. "Do you suppose that they mean you, Ford?" He turned to Ford but found only an empty seat. Ford was well on his way down the row of seats toward the aisle when he realized that he'd forgotten something. He looked back.

"Arthur!" he yelled. "Time to go! Both of you!" Then he continued toward the aisle and ran toward one of the entrance ramps. Arthur looked at Fenchurch and shrugged. They both got up and started making their way down the row of seats.

They caught up to Ford standing at the base of one of the ramps, looking furtively around the concourse.

"Is the coast clear?" he asked.

"Clear of what?" asked Arthur, peering around the corner and down the concourse.

"You'll know."

Arthur tried to think exactly what he might be looking for as he stepped out into the concourse. There were various people milling about getting food and souvenirs but nothing unusual enough to warrant fear in his mind. He looked back at Ford and shrugged, then turned to walk down the concourse. Fenchurch began to follow him.

"Arthur!" Ford hissed, causing both Arthur and Fenchurch to stop and look back at him. "Not that way!"

"But i can see Information Booth Nine just up there by the bend."

"What?"

"Information Booth Nine. That's where we're going, isn't it?"

Chapter 29

The Encyclopedia Galactica devotes 1,239 pages to the subject of love. It cites philosophers, playwrights, and poets. It analyzes social psychology and human development. It categorizes emotions and feelings. It even has a long section on chemical pheromones. The editors at the Encyclopedia Galactica really felt that they covered this elusive topic quite well, and often reference it when displaying their thoroughness at informational tradeshows and county fairs.

The one tidbit of information that they do *not* mention is that every person who has actually read all 1,239 pages of the Encyclopedia Galactica's entry on Love has inevitably moved to a far outlying desolate moon and become a hermit. Many of these newly-converted hermits wholeheartedly embrace Ignism, repeating over and over "it's best not to know... it's best not to know..." They were, of course, in heavy denial because they *did* know everything that the Encyclopedia Galactica had determined was knowable about the subject of love, but that just made them want to not know it all the more.

The more enlightened hermits got together at hermit conventions and developed a support group which turned into a branch of Ignism called the Antiamorites. Their bible was rewritten to read "I wish i didn't know."

If one were to look up Love in the other bestselling galactic reference book, the Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy, which as far as anyone knows has never turned anyone into a hermit, one would find this entry: "It's a pretty good thing."

erately priced items. Thank you for coming to me with this information. It's been quite useful."

He nudged the couple through the door and closed it behind them. He felt slightly guilty for using the Guide in this way, but it was by far the easiest way to get information out, even if it was very self-serving information and if it was slightly against the original spirit of the Guide. The Guide of course had no advertisements in it, but Fonk felt that a tasteful system notice on the first screen wasn't going to open a door to advertisements on every subject, although there had already been some complaints.

Many companies had approached the Guide about placing ads in it, but the company policy was to flatly refuse. The Guide built its reputation on the trust of its users that it would tell them all the honest facts that they needed to know to survive in the galaxy, and any sign of corporate sponsorship would have eroded that trust.

The ethics of programming in the ability to send a short notice, complete with pictures or video, to every one of the millions of copies of the Guide out there were vague, but the ethics of handing out two specific copies of the Guide which did *not* display these notices probably were less vague and less ethical. But it was important to be able to find the two people who carried those specific Guides without them knowing that he was looking for them, on the off chance that they did not return from their task, which they hadn't in quite a long time.

If Ford were to post any research information of course, Fonk could track him instantly, but he doubted that Ford would be doing that until this accounting matter was settled. As for Arthur, Fonk really didn't care about him anymore, as long as he did his part in locating the person they were sent to fetch. And from the account of the unfortunate taxi pilot, it sounded like they'd done that, so all that Fonk was concerned about was finding Ford and this Fenchurch person. Squinkles had been getting more and more nervous as the months had ticked by, and if there was one thing that Fonk found particularly unenjoyable, it was a nervous mouse.

“Are we really on another planet?” asked Fenchurch, looking around at the bar, which seemed like it could be any bar in London except for the strange writing in various places and the odd appendage coming out of the back of the bartender’s head. She couldn’t decide if it was a stubby tail or an extra nose or something else entirely which she probably shouldn’t be staring at, so she stopped staring at it. Then a more pressing thought came to mind.

“Er, Arthur, where do i go to, um, pee?”

Arthur was elated to be able to help Fenchurch out with something that he knew something about, having learned the hard and embarrassing way a number of times which humanoid waste receptacle facilities *not* to go into. He led her back to the back of the bar and pointed to the door with the correct symbol on it.

Fenchurch entered and found a Thumarian in the room.

“Hello,” Fenchurch said politely.

“Glizz muua kfi puan shoulba?” said the Thumarian, probably equally as politely, but Fenchurch couldn’t tell. She nodded and smiled and hurried into a stall.

The Thumarian watched Fenchurch quizzically, then walked out of the room. “My package cost sixty-three cents to mail,” she said to Arthur, who was standing outside the door.

“I’m sorry?” said Arthur.

“You disgust me!” said the Thumarian. “My dad is the greatest flytrap anti-dividable green hmm hmmm hmmm...”

Arthur looked confused and tapped his ear, wondering if his babelfish was not working properly. The Thumarian gave him a condescending look and walked off. Arthur went back over to Ford and sat down next to him.

“Ford, i’d like you to promise me something.”

“OK, i promise that i will drink three beers while we’re in this bar.”

“No, i’d like you to promise me something specific.”

“OK, i promise that i will drink *these* three beers while we’re in this bar.”

“No, Ford, i want you to promise me that you’ll look after

Chapter 36

Fonk stood at the window of his office, drumming his fingers against the glass. His afternoon appointment was late. he didn’t like it when people were late. Finally there was a low “boop” and his receptionist informed him that his appointment had arrived. The door to his office opened and in walked a youngish couple, both slightly overweight, and both dressed as though they’d just come from the beach, although they hadn’t.

Fonk put on a completely false, warm smile. “Hello,” he said. “Welcome to the Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy. I hope your trip was pleasant?”

“Oh yes, quite,” said the woman.

“My name is Fonk. I hear that you have some information for me?”

“Yes, well, my name’s Pithya, and this is my husband Vreebleburt.” Vreebleburt nodded. “We’re on vacation!”

“Really?” said Fonk, trying hard to hide his sarcasm, but not succeeding very well.

“Oh yes!” said Pithya, oblivious of any sarcasm anywhere in the building. “It’s been lovely! We’ve been everywhere! The colossal heads on Glida Spoida were—” She broke off, probably because Fonk had stopped trying to hide his displeasure with them being there and had adopted a stern and impatient stare, which was directed icily at them.

“Er, yes, anyway, we’d just had lunch at the Big Bang Burger Bar and i was going to look in the Guide for a good place to go after lunch and when i turned it on, well, there was this note about some missing people and i said to Vreebleburt, what did i say, dear?”

“Saw ‘em.”

“Yes, we saw them. I mean, i think we did. We were just leaving when this crowd of people passed by us and the one near the front

“Speak gently! I think i just saw an emu.” said another.

“Apples in a tree, apples in a blossom, hmmm hmmm hmmm-
mmm...” said a third.

The group sat down at a table and Fenchurch leaned in towards Arthur. “Can you understand them?” she whispered.

“Er, yes, in a way,” whispered Arthur back.

“What are they saying?”

“Well, i’m not sure. It doesn’t seem to make any sense, and now they all just seem to be humming.”

They sat and watched the group of Thumarians while trying to look like they weren’t watching them until Ford came hurrying back across the bar, hands clapped firmly over his ears. he made some more odd waves at the bartender, who came over and handed Ford a small slip of paper. Ford looked at it quickly, then reached into his bag for money.

“Six Altarian dollars for five Earth beers!” he said, grinning. “Cheaper than Earth itself!”

“If there *were* an Earth,” said Arthur, before Ford could stop him.

“I can’t believe it’s really been destroyed,” said Fenchurch.

Ford slapped his hand on his forehead as the bartender grabbed back the little slip of paper. He did a few calculations behind the bar, then handed Ford a new slip. Ford took it while glaring unpleasantly at Arthur and Fenchurch. He read it aloud.

“Five Earth beers at thirty-two Altarian dollars each. Total, one hundred and sixty Altarian dollars.” He glared at Fenchurch and Arthur just long enough to make them both uncomfortable, then shrugged and pulled out his Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy charge card and slapped it on the bar. “Oh well, it’s not my money. Now stay here and don’t talk to anyone. I’ll be right back.” He gestured at the bartender again, who nodded, then he clapped his hands over his ears again and ran out of the bar. Fenchurch watched him go, then looked around at the bar again, at the people talking in a strange language, at the silent bartender, at the odd bits of Earth artifacts hung on the walls, and finally at Arthur.

The stadium reminded Arthur of a typical English football stadium, only about fifty percent bigger, as the Ballgy field was quite a bit larger than a football field. The nets were half-domes and were places in opposite corners of the field. There was something odd about the field itself and it took Arthur a few minutes to notice that the whole playing surface, while evidently made out of a natural grass, was slowly swaying and undulating like a gently rolling sea. This caused players to stumble occasionally while they ran, but most were fairly used to the moving surface.

By the time everyone had settled into their seats about halfway up the stands, the game was well under way. Ford noted that Engreedle was already down two players and checked the giant scoreboard to see what had happened. One took a ballgy spine to the face (the paralysis lasts much longer when a player takes a ballgy spine to the head or neck, so it’s pointless to leave him on the field) and the other was removed with a broken hip due to a penalty kick.

“Isn’t that man hurt?” said Fenchurch, pointing at a Colambft player who was lying on the field near them, frozen in an odd position, as if he was trying to do the backstroke on the grass.

“No, he’s just stunned,” said Ford. “He’ll come back around.”

Sure enough, in a few minutes, the player started clasping and unclasping one hand and wiggling a foot. After a couple more minutes, he got himself up and stiffly walked off, but he wasn’t yet spry enough to avoid being grabbed by two Engreedle players who swung him around and used him as a bat to whack the ballgy down the field. They then used their penalty to kick him in the groin but by that time he’d recovered most of his agility and managed to twist mostly out of the way.

After they’d watched the game for a while, Fenchurch turned to Arthur. “So,” she said. “You never finished telling me why my brain is so lovely.”

Arthur looked at her beautiful face and decided that it was time to fess up.

“Well, remember when i told you that your brain holds the question to the answer to life, the universe, and everything?”

Chapter 31

The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy doesn't have much to say about Thumar 4. It's a small backwater planet that sits on the edge of sector ZZ9-Plural-Z-Alpha, but not actually *in* sector ZZ9-Plural-Z-Alpha, which gives visitors and residents alike a certain comfort in knowing that the planet probably won't pop out of existence without warning.

The entire Thumarian economy is based on the export of two things; Earth beer and babelfish. Earth beer is of course repackaged and sold as Thumarian ale, in dozens and dozens of variations, and is well known throughout the galaxy as the best beer on the market. Many many planets brew their own beers, but there was something about the size, geography, and curious wobble of a medium-sized blue-green planet tucked deep within sector ZZ9-Plural-Z-Alpha that made it perfect for growing all the right ingredients for excellent beer. The Thumarians, realizing that those stupid Earthlings weren't about to invent space travel any time soon, set up an exporting company in Nova Scotia where a tightly controlled and heavily guarded wormhole was maintained with a direct connection to Thumar 4. Had Ford Prefect known about this wormhole while he was stranded on Earth, he may not have had to wait for the Vogon constructor fleet to hitch a ride off the planet, but in all likelihood, he still would have had to. The Thumarians' wormhole was *very* heavily guarded.

With the immense popularity of Thumarian ale, Thumar 4 became widely known and inevitably people came to visit. It was because of this that Thumar 4 had its second major export. The Thumarians speak in a dialect so amazingly steeped in situational metaphors and references that very few other cultures can understand them. For instance, if it's a sunny morning and local elections are less than seven days away and no one is wearing green pants, a Thumarian would ask someone for the time by saying "The bees point North?" But

level, although now that he thought about it, having a bit of her brain removed might explain it pretty well.

"I ended up in a stairwell."

"Oooh, that's cool," said Trillian, even though she probably didn't really think that it was cool, or she wasn't even thinking at all, which seemed more likely. "How long were you in there?"

"Er, a few hours i think. Then i was sold as a pet for about a day, then Ford and i were sent on a mission to rescue Fenchurch here before the Earth exploded. We've only recently gotten back.

"Wow. Why'd it take so long to find her?"

Arthur frowned and thought for a second or two. "How long has it been since you found yourself in that garden?"

"Oh, i dunno," said Trillian, tilting her head and thinking, "in our time, probably a few years."

"Oh," said Arthur. "Well, we've only been back a couple of days."

"Ohhhhhhh..." said Trillian. And then Arthur noticed that Trillian's demeanor changed. Suddenly she didn't look like the ditz she'd become but more like the smart and observant Trillian that Arthur remembered. "Arthur," she said, leaning in very close and speaking quietly but urgently, "it's very simple. You came to the Big Bang Burger Bar from one time, and left to another. This one. You've skipped forward in time and this could be very dangerous for you. Whatever you do, don't let them take her brain." She nodded in Fenchurch's direction. Arthur glanced over at Fenchurch, who was engrossed in the Guide. He turned back to Trillian and was about to ask her what she meant when she ran her hand along his sleeve.

"Oooh! What a cool shirt! Where'd you get it?"

Arthur looked at her suspiciously. "I'm sorry, what did you just say?"

"I said you have a cool shirt."

"No, before that."

"Hmm, i don't know. What were we talking about?"

"Something about her—" he jerked his head subtly in Fenchurch's direction, then lowered his voice, "um, brain."

"Ew! That's not cool," said Trillian. "Arthur, i've gotta go be a cool

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Ford looked at this whole business of abducting Earthlings and transporting them to a specific destination in a timely manner for who knows what purpose as something that didn't sit right with his preferred line of work, which had much fewer demands as to what needed to be done, where one had to be, and what time one had to be there. But he fully understood the advantage of not having to deal with the Accounting Department, so he continued with the logistics of the task at hand and figured that the sooner he delivered Fenchurch to Fonk and Squinkles, the sooner he could get on with not organizing anything.

He hurried back into the bar to find Fenchurch casually watching the group of Thumarians at the table, trying to decipher their language, and Arthur casually tapping his fingers on the bar along with whatever tune his babelfish was humming in his ear.

Ford sat down next to Fenchurch. "Here," he said, dropping a small plastic vial on the bar in front of her. "Put this in your ear."

Fenchurch looked at the little iridescent fish in the vial. "In my ear?" she asked.

"Oh! A babelfish," said Arthur, continuing his annoying Earthling custom of stating the obvious. "Yes, you put it in your ear and it will translate all languages for you. Marvelous little creatures. Truly amazing, they really are."

Fenchurch looked skeptical. "Really?" she asked.

"Oh yes," said Arthur.

"Look," said Ford, "we all have them. It's what you do if you want to travel the galaxy. Besides, we just saved you, and only you, from the complete annihilation of the Earth. Trust us."

Fenchurch considered this for a second. "OK," she said, picking up the fish. "Which ear?"

"Right," said Arthur.

"Left," said Ford.

penalty kick. Any team awarded a penalty kick generally places it into the shins or groin of an opposing player.

Since no one is allowed to touch the ballgy, the general strategy is to use your opponents as ballgy-hitters. A good Udrian Ballgy player will pick up an opponent and use him to whack the ballgy down the field, thereby gaining both a better field position and a free penalty kick.

in a toast. Arthur and Fenchurch raised theirs.

“To Earth!” said Fenchurch.

“To Earth!” said Arthur.

“Pillow on!” said an old man who’d sidled up next to them.

Arthur swallowed his beer. “Excuse me?” he said to the old man.

“No woe,” said the old man, “pillow on?”

Arthur stared at him blankly for a moment, then hesitantly raised his beer again. “To Earth,” he said cheerily and proceeded to drink the beer down so that he wouldn’t have to say anything more.

Ford leaned over and waved at the man. “No habla espanol!” he said, and waved as if to shoo the man away.

“I’m going to fall,” said the man, looking a little less friendly. “Kind of,” he added for apparent emphasis.

Arthur kept his face buried in his mug, drinking very deliberately and slowly. Ford suddenly found something fascinating to look at underneath the bar. The old man glared at them all until Fenchurch finally cleared her throat and said “um... the falcon flies!”

The old man stepped back in surprise. Ford jerked his head back up and smacked it hard on the underside of the bar. Arthur stopped drinking and stared at Fenchurch, still holding the mug in front of his face. Fenchurch looked around at the quiet bar and saw that everyone was looking at her except for Ford, who was staggering around in small circles, clutching his head.

Arthur suddenly realized that although he’d stopped drinking his beer, he was still tipping the mug into his face and there was now an overflow of beer spilling around his mouth and down on his shirt. He spluttered and slobbered the mug back on the bar, kicking back his barstool as he did so. This left Fenchurch face-to-face with the old man. She cleared her throat again and tried to sound cheerful and confident. “Yes,” she said, forcing a smile at the old man, “the falcon flies!”

The utter and complete silence that followed was mercifully broken by an approaching whining sound, followed by a heavy thump. Ford carefully waved his hand above his head to make sure that nothing was there, then snapped his head upright. “Taxi’s here! Time to

applause. He waved at the crowd, then came over and sat down next to Ford and Trillian.

“How’s your frood, Earthman?” said Od. “And who’s this delectable young Earthwoman you’ve brought along?” Od stood up, and with a smooth flourish produced a business card from some pocket that wasn’t currently housing three or four pairs of sunglasses. “Od’s my name, cool’s my game,” he said, handing the card to Fenchurch.

“Fenchurch,” said Fenchurch, looking at the card. It said “Od Brox - Cool Detective.” “What’s a cool detective?” she asked.

Od sat down again and motioned for them all to move in closer. “Y’see,” he said in a low voice, “when people grow up, they hit a certain age and they suddenly realize that they’re not cool anymore. They *used* to be cool, but now they’re not and they can’t understand why. So they hire me to find their cool for them again. They don’t care how much it costs, they just want to be cool again. So i take ‘em to a bunch of cool places and show them what’s cool, and then Trillian convinces them that they’re actually cool. She’s great at that.” he gave Trillian a squeeze. She giggled.

“Great gig, eh?” said Od, leaning back and putting on another pair of sunglasses. They all nodded and agreed that it did seem like a pretty good gig. “Hey, we’re going to an Udrian Ballgy match, wanna come along? Colambft versus Engreedle 5. Should be a great game!”

Od stood up and announced to his group that they were leaving and since Ford was leaving the restaurant at the head of the pack, chatting with Od, Arthur and Fenchurch felt like they didn’t have much of a choice but to follow along, which they did.

They headed down to the now overly familiar parking garage and Od led them to a large spaceship which, to Arthur, looked like an oversized chrome schoolbus, with tasteful jet black accents. It didn’t look like any other spaceship he’d ever seen, which was, of course, the point, and which is why it was so cool. They all piled in and zoomed away from the Big Bang Burger Bar through its time vortex for what Arthur seriously hoped would be the last time.

“How you folks doin’ back there?” came a voice from up front. Arthur and Fenchurch looked up to see the pilot grinning back at them from the other side of the window. He made a little wave. “You folks from around here?”

“Er, well, nearby, i guess,” said Arthur. “We are, anyway,” he added, indicating himself and Fenchurch.

“Yeah? Where ’bouts?”

“Earth. Although it doesn’t exist anymore.”

“No kiddin’? You from Earth? Wow. They said there weren’t supposed to be no survivors. Good job on gettin’ out!”

“Er, thanks,” said Arthur.

“Hey, ‘tween you, me, and the blackness of space, they’re not building no interstellar bypass, y’know.”

“They’re not?” said Arthur, a little alarmed that the pathetic feeble excuse to wipe out an entire planet might be even feebler than road construction.

“Naw, it’s all a big conspiracy, see? Some bigwig wanted the Earth destroyed and he made up this whole interstellar bypass thing and got the Vogons involved, ‘cause they’ll do anything without asking questions and presto! Boom! No more Earth.”

“Why would someone want the Earth destroyed?” asked Fenchurch, in awe.

“hey, beats me, i just fly a taxi. But if you was to ask me, i’d say it was ‘cause there was something mighty important on that planet that someone didn’t want anyone to find out about. But you didn’t hear that from me.”

Arthur had been traipsing through the galaxy on and off Earth now for long enough that he had some semblance of an idea as to what was going on. He wondered if that something that someone didn’t want anyone to find out about might be encased in a lovely form that was smooth and strong in all the right places and soft and curvy in all the other right places and was sitting right next to him in a taxi flying across the galaxy away from earth. He gazed at Fenchurch until he noticed that she was looking back at him. He nervously looked away.

“Um, well, i suppose.”

“And is this your date? That’s so cool! Hi! I’m Trillian!” She stuck out her hand.

“Oh. Fenchurch,” said Fenchurch, shaking Trillian’s hand. She was a bit taken aback by the sudden bubbly turn the conversation had taken.

“Er, yes, Fenchurch, Trillian,” said Arthur, gesturing toward Trillian, relieved that he didn’t have to ask Trillian who she was. “She’s, well, an old friend i guess... although apparently we did have a child together at some point, too...”

“Ooooh, yeah, Random,” said Trillian. “You haven’t seen her anywhere, have you? I don’t know *what* happened to her since we were in that cool bar. Oh well. It was so cool to see you again, Arthur! And it was so cool to meet you, Fenchurch!”

Trillian traipsed away. Arthur watched her go and wondered why she sounded so... so, well, stupid. He tried to think of another word to describe how Trillian was acting but nothing seemed to sum it up so well. He considered that maybe she was trapped in a stairwell for much longer than he was and went insane.

“You had a child with, um, *her*?” asked Fenchurch.

“Well, it wasn’t exactly *her*, and it wasn’t exactly *we*, and, er, genetically, um...” Arthur looked at Fenchurch in a way that he hoped said “it’s really not as strange as you might think and i can explain it all in much greater detail at a later date, perhaps over dinner, but at this moment i’m not sure that i’m particularly up to the task” but which in his heart he feared said “i’m a dork.”

Fenchurch looked at Arthur in a way that Arthur really didn’t want to interpret and so changed the subject. “Let’s see what’s going on over there,” he said, pointing in the direction that Trillian had gone and where there seemed to be some sort of private party. He and Fenchurch wove their way through the tables and chairs and arrived at a crowd of people in a small lounge area. Most of them were wearing at least one pair of sunglasses and it looked like they were all trying to act cool. Ford was there, sitting on a couch, enjoying a drink with Trillian, but what caught Arthur’s eye was the man standing at the

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Ford, Arthur, and Fenchurch walked into the Big Bang Burger Bar and almost immediately a hover-bot zoomed in and announced “Dolphin, party of three!”

“That’s us,” said Ford, and he followed the happy hover-bot out into the restaurant.

“Dolphin?” Fenchurch asked Arthur.

“Ford is actually quite well known in some circles, so he doesn’t like to use his own name,” said Arthur as they trailed behind Ford and the hover-bot. “He’s a researcher for the Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy.”

“The what?”

“Oh, that’s right! You’ve never seen the Guide!” Arthur reached into his travel bag and pulled out his copy as they sat down at a table.

It was a wonderful meal. Ford ordered nearly everything on the menu and tasted little bits of most of it. Fenchurch ordered a Big Bang Burger, since she was at the Big Bang Burger Bar after all, and was slightly disappointed that what the rest of the galaxy called a burger was more like a rolled enchilada of woven meat and egg strands wrapped around seasoned deep fried gluten paste, but she was delighted to find that it tasted wonderful. Arthur tried to explain to the waitress what a sandwich was and she helpfully tried to bring him what he wanted but what he got looked more like a spiky calzone. It still tasted good and Arthur didn’t complain. They sat and enjoyed their food, chatted about the Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy and the galaxy in general, and marveled at the cataclysmic fury of the instant of the Big Bang happening all around them outside the diner. The only interruption came halfway through their meal when a frantic and clearly insane hover-bot zoomed around the restaurant over everyone’s heads

yelling “Dent! Party of two! Dent! Party of two!” over and over until it finally threw itself into an airlock and ejected itself into the fiery inferno of creation happening outside.

Unlike the Restaurant at the End of the Universe, the Big Bang Burger Bar didn’t wobble back and forth across the threshold of existence. Since the universe was created in an instant, if one were to park themselves precisely in that instant, there’d be an awful lot of things going on. Imagine taking every fireworks show you’ve ever seen or even not seen and only heard about, stacking them on top of each other and putting that inside a large room. Add in every rock show, circus, car race, hurricane, typhoon, tornado, and the powerful heartfelt ending to every dramatic movie ever made, sprinkle in every drop of hot sauce in existence, and charge with enough static electricity to reverse the gravitational pull of Jupiter. The Big Bang is a billion times more awesome than that.

“So,” said Fenchurch to Ford, when they’d all finished eating and were sitting back in their chairs enjoying the ambience. “Why me?”

“Why not you?” said Ford, picking nonchalantly at his teeth.

“There are, or *were*, billions of people on Earth. Why did two space aliens—”

“I’m an Englishman,” interjected Arthur.

“One space alien and one space-travelling Englishman,” continued Fenchurch, “suddenly land on Earth *just* before it was about to be destroyed, and come looking for me, and only me, out of all those billions of people?”

“Er, accounting, mostly.” said Ford.

“Accounting?”

“Mostly,” said Ford. “In fact, I have to go do some accounting right now.” He slid off his seat and hurried away before Fenchurch could say anything more. Fenchurch turned to Arthur.

“What’s he not telling me?”

Arthur sighed. Then he proceeded to tell Fenchurch all about how the Earth was really one big giant computer. He told her about Deep Thought, about the answer to life, the universe, and everything, about how that answer was forty-two, and about the search for the *question*