

Hello? Is Anybody There?

by
Adam S. Douglas

This book was written because, well, i really don't know why.

NOTICE

This book, like the last book (The Big Bang Burger Bar), is most probably illegal.

This book has not been endorsed by the estate, representatives, or heirs of Douglas Adams. The characters created by Mr. Adams in his Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy 5-part trilogy, including their mannerism and idiosyncrasies, remain copyrighted by the original author.

This book may not be published, either on press or on the Internet, without the express written approval by the estate, representatives, or heirs of Douglas Adams, which as you've probably guessed, hasn't been given. Too bad for the world, but lucky for you, as you have an underground copy in your hot little hands.

Please be mindful of the wishes of the former Mr. Adams and don't go spreading this around like grass seed. But do share and enjoy. If you want more copies of either book, point your Guide through the sub-etha to www.thebbbb.com.

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.

Chapter 1

The Universe is big. It is very very very very very big. It is so big that a million universes could fit inside it, and there would still be room for a few billion more. In the grand scale of Things That Are Big, the Universe has held the number one spot for quite some time now, and there hasn't been a serious contender for the crown since before the Big Bang.

It could be argued, and indeed some people have made their careers out of arguing, that any run-of-the-mill parallel universe is just exactly the same size as *the* Universe and therefore *the* Universe can't claim to be the unquestionably biggest thing ever if there's all these other things that are the exact same size, now can it? Of course it can. It's *the* Universe, man, it can do whatever it wants. Where do you think all of those other universes are? They're in the Universe. *The* Universe. The Universe is not only big enough to hold everything in existence, it's big enough to hold everything in every infinite parallel universe as well. That, in short, is why the Universe is so very very big. And if you think that all of that is mathematically impossibly, you're not thinking hard enough.

Now, the problem with the overall bigness of the Universe is that it's so colossally vast that things tend to get lost in it. And not just buttons and presidential elections. There have been entire civilizations which have gone missing only to turn up a few millennia later in someone's sock drawer.

Of course, if you happen to *not* want to be found, the Universe is a pretty good place to be in. Granted, somewhere above 99.9% of the Universe is uninhabitable by reproductive life forms, so that cuts down on the hiding places, but still, given how microscopically small these life forms are in comparison to the previously demonstrated bigness of the Universe, that still leaves a lot of space to not be found in.

Fortunately for one man, what he was looking for was most likely confined to a single galaxy, in a single three-dimensional plane of

existence, in the colossal humongousness of the Universe. But since this man had never had the helpful misfortune of having been in the Total Perspective Vortex, he was unaware of just how insignificant one galaxy is, compared with the entirety of existence, and so for him, the task ahead of him seemed dauntingly large and quite possibly impossible.

But Arthur Dent had nothing better to do.

Chapter 2

It was a Monday. At least it felt like a Monday. Days and weeks and years had been replaced for Arthur by transportation arrangements, star systems, and the aggravating annoyance of the unavailability of afternoon tea.

But tea or not, Arthur chose to live his life by what he knew. And right now he knew that he wasn't quite awake yet and already six things had gone wrong and in Arthur's mind that could only mean that it was a Monday.

It was true that all of the big inconveniences in Arthur's life had seemed to come on Thursdays (and most of them involved the destruction of something large) and Arthur readily admitted that he never quite got the hang of Thursdays. "They feel like they ought to be at the end of the week but they're not," he would say to whoever was listening, which in many instances was no one. "And they just have an unsettled air about them, like they're teasing you," he would add, again, most often to no one. These statements would almost assuredly be followed by an awkward pause, even if there was no one but Arthur in the room.

But today was not unsettled or teasing or condescending in any way. Today was one of those days when all the little things that on any other day wouldn't even be remembered to have happened two minutes later were brought starkly to the front of the mind simply because they did *not* happen as they should have happened. And most of these non-happenings involved pain. And most of the pain involved Arthur. For him, the rapid accumulation of trivial but painful malfunctions equaled Monday.

It started out well enough. Arthur woke up. But then it went downhill from there.

Arthur rolled out of the cramped sleeping bay that he and Ford were sharing on their way to Arthur-didn't-know-where and bumped his head. He knocked his hand against the rough edge of the bunk as

he went to feel the bump on his head. His socks didn't want to seat themselves on his feet in any comfortable way, his left shoe refused to go on properly until the third try, he caught the hem of his pant leg on a sharp corner which made him trip and slam his fingers into the door. He banged his shoulder on a protruding pipe in the hallway, a small flying messenger robot nicked his ear as it whizzed past, one of the ship's crew inadvertently kicked him in the shin as he entered the galley, he cut his finger on a butter knife of all things, the top of the jar of jam wouldn't go on straight and he pinched a finger on the fifth try to seat it, and finally, the piece of bread with jam that he'd made for himself slipped out of his hand and, even though Arthur had carefully folded the bread over so that it was impossible, if it fell, to land jam-side down, it impossibly flung itself open in mid-fall and landed jam-side down.

Having your bread and jam fall to the floor and land jam-side down doesn't cause any physical pain of course, unless you happen to smack your forehead on the corner of a table as you're picking it up. This is, of course, exactly what happened to Arthur, and he added to the overall badness of the morning by instinctively reaching to his head where it had hit the table, not remembering (probably because he'd just hit his head) that he, by this time, had already picked up the bread and jam and it was in the hand that reached for his head, jam-side in.

There is a race of beings that lives on the second moon of the planet Grankishanks whose very existence is defined by little annoyances. It should be noted that the race of beings in question, the Plibli, consider that they live on the *first* moon of Grankishanks and who decided that their moon was the second one and what's so great about the other moon that it should be first anyway? But the fact that the official galactic records designate their moon at the second moon of Grankishanks keeps the Plibli all happily annoyed.

The Plibli's are defined by their overwhelming ecstasy at being annoyed by small things. If a Plibli were to, say, get up in the morning and stub her toe, this would make her very happy and would put her in such a fog of delight that she'd most likely bump into something or

not watch where she was putting a lid onto a jar or maybe even drop a piece of bread with jam. And of course, all of these would make her insanely happy. When all of the Plibli are walking around in their own personal hazes of utter happiness, nothing much gets done, and that can get very annoying, which of course makes the Plibli collapse into fits of ecstatic joy.

The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy describes the second moon of the planet Grankishanks as "perhaps the single most happiest place in the galaxy. Don't go there."

Ford Prefect bounded into the galley the way an overly excited but not-too-bright labrador retriever might bound into, well, anywhere.

"Arthur!" he said, not noticing, or perhaps choosing to ignore, the fact that Arthur was standing in the middle of the room nonchalantly holding a piece of bread with jam on it to the side of his head. "Er, busy?"

"I was just explaining to the crew how bread with jam is a common remedy for cuts and bruises in my species," said Arthur, trying to push the limits of nonchalance to previously unheard-of limits in this sector of the galaxy.

Ford narrowed his eyes. He'd grown accustomed to Earthlings stating the obvious but there were times when the obvious didn't seem so obvious and the possibility existed that there was something else under the obvious which wasn't so obvious. Ford wondered if this might be one of those times. He chose to ignore it.

"Arthur," he said again, partly to regain his train of thought and partly to annoy Arthur.

"What," said Arthur, becoming annoyed, and being an Earthling and not a Plibli, not enjoying it.

"Good news!" said Ford, pulling a pair of scissors out of his bag (Arthur immediately interpreted this as "bad news!"). "The captain's agreed to jettison us at the next planet in exchange for a bit of your hair."

"My what?"

"Hair, Arthur. The stuff on your head, or, er, well, yes, the head will be fine."

“Why would the captain want my hair?” asked Arthur, raising his hand to his head, forgetting once again that he was holding a piece of bread with jam on it in that hand.

“Who knows?” said Ford. “Space-jeebies, simian fetish, galacto-spazmodicus... could be anything!” He stepped toward Arthur, raising the scissors. “Now, uh, something *without* jam on it i think...”

Arthur stepped back. “Why can’t he have *your* hair?”

“Look, Arthur,” said Ford, trying to patiently explain but not hiding his non-happy annoyance very well. “Let’s just give him your hair and he’ll graciously jettison us onto the next planet.”

“And if i refuse?” said Arthur, mustering all the dignity a man with jam on both sides of his head can muster.

“Well then he’ll just jettison us into space,” said Ford with a shrug. “Personally, i’d prefer the planet.”

Ford had a good point, thought Arthur, and it wasn’t just the tip of the pair of scissors in his face, although the whole concept of being jettisoned from a space ship blasting through an un-life-sustainable vacuum didn’t at all appeal to him. He seemed to remember being jettisoned into space once before and only surviving at the last possible second because it was very close to the least probable thing that could have happened at the time.

Probability is a very simple calculation. You simply multiply the mathematical equivalent of now by the mathematical equivalent of the future. While brutally simple, the obvious problem with this formula is that now is changing every nanosecond and the future is, most of the time, unknown. This makes determining the numbers to plug into this equation a bit of a tricky problem, which is why most leading scientists and mathematicians (and in fact pretty much all of the non-leading scientists and mathematicians as well) have not adopted this universal probability formula and instead rely on any number of less general situation-specific formulas, many of which actually produce arguable results. It has been theorized that those non-general formulas are preferred, due to the fact that they produce arguable results, and most scientists and mathematicians justify their salaries by being able to argue about results.

There are some scientists and mathematicians, however, who are proponents of the general unified theory of probability. These great thinkers are referred to by the leading and not-leading scientists and mathematicians as quacks, loonies, nutters, and a host of less interesting names. But these nutters persist in their unshakable belief that the grand unified theory of general probability is probably true. Unfortunately, time-verified backwards-stabilized calculations where a given previous now is multiplied by a relative future to the given past now (that future being the time-stopped present) all come out to either zero or one, which doesn't help the nutter's case much.

The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy has a very cryptic entry for probability:

Probability is calculated by multiplying now by the future. If you don't know the future, you probably won't get an answer (see: Probability). Calculating.....

If you were to stare at this definition long enough, hoping for an insightful calculation, you probably wouldn't get one, but most likely something would happen while you were sitting and staring at a row of dots instead of paying attention to whatever was going on around you.

Chapter 3

Arthur had no idea what was going on around him. He and Ford had been thrown into a small metal container which at once became very very cold, followed by becoming very very hot, followed by being very very stopped. It was this last bit that had put Arthur in a daze, as it had come so very very suddenly. Ford, as usual, seemed completely unperturbed by their short temperature and speed varying journey. He kicked open one end of the pod that they'd travelled in and stepped out to look around. By the time Arthur had staggered out into the greenish sunshine, Ford was doing jumping jacks to get himself used to the gravity of whatever planet they'd ended up on.

"Where are we?" asked Arthur, shaking his head to try to clear his thinking a bit. It didn't help his thinking, but it did send a scattered spray of jam into the air around him.

"No idea," said Ford, ducking some flecks of jam. "But i would guess..." He trailed off as a small crowd started to gather around them. They seemed in awe of the strange space craft that had just crash-landed on their planet. They seemed suspicious of the strange aliens who had emerged from it. They seemed curious. They seemed peaceful. They seemed... lumpy.

"Vogons," said Arthur.

"Yep," agreed Ford. "The Vogonsphere. Hoopy." He flicked his eyes around the gathered Vogons until he spotted the one he surmised was the most important due to the fact that he had the most clothes on.

"Ahem," he said, stepping up to the overly-clad Vogon and making a deliberate show of being much too formal. "Take me to your leader."

The Vogon blinked. Ford blinked back.

"My leader?" asked the Vogon.

"Yes," said Ford politely. "I am an alien and i've landed on your planet and i wish to speak to the nearest official person of, uh, offi-

cialness.”

The Vogon blinked several more times, which took a while, as Vogons blink in much the same manner that they do everything else—very slowly and deliberately. Ford bided his time by casually flicking congealing blobs of jam from his sleeve.

“Do you have a permit?” the Vogon asked at last.

“Oh yes,” Ford lied. “Filed it ages ago. They should have it all there.”

The Vogon oozed its head sideways a bit and looked past Ford to the blackened escape pod half impacted into the ground. “I don’t see it.”

Ford looked back at the escape pod, then at the Vogon, then back at the escape pod again for good measure. He furrowed his brows for a brief second. “Yes, well, as i said, i filed it, so it’s most likely on its way to some bureaucratic registry where it will be catalogued, stamped, approved, and kept on record for future reference.” Ford smiled as he finished this sentence. “That oughtta make the bureaucratic blob happy,” he thought to himself.

It didn’t.

“You need a permit to park here,” said the Vogon, pointing an appendage at the escape pod.

Ford imperceptibly rolled his eyes, then quickly regained his smooth composure. “Oh, *that!*” he said, whipping out his Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy universal charge card and presenting it to the Vogon. “This should take care of it.”

The Vogon leaned toward the card in Ford’s outstretched hand and read it aloud. “Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy Correspondent Universal Charge Card. Fully backed and insured. Works everywhere. Really.” He swivelled his eyes up at Ford. “That’s not a permit, that’s a charge card.”

“Yes, an *unlimited* charge card,” said Ford, wagging the card in front of the Vogon’s face. “Could easily pay for a parking permit, or maybe a nice dinner... a new car... and extra wing on your house... sky’s the limit, really. It is *unlimited*.”

The Vogon looked up at the sky with what might have been

described as a questioning look on its face, although it may have been an expression of hopeless loss or possibly horrible pain. Whatever it was, it resolved itself into blank incomprehension when it came down from its skyward tilt. Ford took the opportunity to relieve the Vogon of its incomprehension.

“It’s a bribe,” he explained in his most patient i-have-to-explain-this-to-an-idiot voice.

“That’s not allowed,” said the Vogon.

“Neither is parking without a permit,” countered Ford. “And as you well know, two wrongs *do* in fact make a right. Simple binary addition. So if we could all just go to some place where I can transfer a gigantic sum of money over to you, then we can park here and you can go buy a luxury wallowing pool or whatever it is you Vogons luxuriate in, and everyone will be happy, OK?”

The Vogon blinked again, and in the time that it took for the blink to occur, Ford could have easily run away, come back, and run away again, but he really thought that he had this one. He really felt it. He really was sure that no one in their right mind, not even a Vogon, would turn down such a fabulously enormous bribe.

The thing that made Ford consider the possibility that perhaps he was really wrong was that the end of the Vogon’s blink was punctuated quite emphatically by the levelling of a Kill-O-Zap laser gun just in front of Ford’s nose.

“Ah,” said Ford, using his most patient i’m-now-talking-to-an-idiot-with-a-laser-gun-pointed-at-my-face voice. “I see. Er, hold that thought for a bit of a tick.”

He turned and looked at Arthur, who was standing by the escape pod wiping the last bit of jam from the sides of his head with his towel. “Arthur?” he said in a very cool and calm voice. “Run.”

The ensuing sprint, dodge, and dive into the wreckage of the escape pod by Ford happened in the blink of an eye, and not a Vogon’s eye either. Arthur barely had time to react to the first laser blast that singed the last remaining bits of jam-matter from the side of his head and the second one that put a hole in his towel, nor all the subsequent ones that peppered the side of the capsule. By the time he did get a

chance to react, the shooting was over, Ford was tucked somewhat safely into the now smoldering-even-more escape pod, the Vogon responsible for all the shooting was squelching his way over to him, and his reaction was a rather embarrassing spasmodic flinch.

“Now,” said the Vogon, poking the still-smoking Kill-O-Zap at Arthur’s face. “Have you got a permit to park here?”

“Er, no.”

“Then you can’t park here.”

“Well how do we go about getting a permit?”

“You have to get a permit before you park here.”

“We’ve already parked here.”

This made the Vogon stop and think, which, for a Vogon, is not a natural course of action.

“Actually,” continued Arthur, “we haven’t really parked here so much as crashed here. Is there a separate permit for crashing, or will the parking permit suffice?”

There is a certain giddy superiority that comes over people when they are put in an adversarial position with someone who is clearly their mental inferior. Arthur was feeling that now. It wasn’t often that Earthlings felt this way when traversing the galaxy as they were generally considered by most other species to be fairly low on the evolutionary ladder, but if there was a species anywhere that was placed on a lower rung than Earthlings, it was Vogons. Arthur pressed on.

“And really, it wasn’t so much a crash as a hard landing. Do you have hard landing permits? Or maybe we just don’t get a permit at all...”

The Kill-O-Zap against Arthur’s cheekbone made him hesitant to finish this line of conversation.

“So, uh... what happens if someone, say, parks here without a permit?” asked Arthur, hoping that the answer didn’t have anything to do with the discharge of laser pistols at very close range.

Look,’ said the Vogon. “You can’t park here unless you got a permit to park here first. So you’ll have to get one before you can park here.

“In other words,” said Arthur, thinking the problem through

carefully, “we have to go back in time, get a permit, then we crash land again, we’ll already have the permit, and we can park here, right?”

This seemed to be the most ridiculous thing in the world to Arthur, and he stood there waiting for the inevitable escalation of threats and/or laser pistols towards him. When neither of those things happened, Arthur was quite surprised.

“Yeah,” said the Vogon. “That’ll work.”

There was a loud bang from the escape pod, followed by a louder series of creatively strung-together curse words. Ford scrambled out of the pod, holding his head. After a few shakes of his head and a few more well-chosen curses, he popped brightly up to Arthur’s side.

“Brilliant!” he said. “Slammy!” He nudged Arthur away from the Vogon with the laser gun, talking cheerily all the while. “Right then, we’ll just go off to our time portal and get that permitty thing and the next time that you see us, which will to be have been the first time you have will see us, we’ll by then before have already will have the permit and all that and everything will be just hoopy!”

Ford and Arthur weaved their way through the crowd of Vogons and Ford quickened his pace down the dismal street. Arthur glanced back at the Vogon with the Kill-O-Zap, who seemed to be trying very hard to figure out what just happened.

Chapter 4

Lucifer smiled.

Well, it wasn't exactly a smile, since onboard ship's computers built by Sirius Cybernetics Corporation with Personality Plus Programming ("Three Ps to Please!") don't physically have the capabilities of moving any sort of facial structure into any sort of pattern that would be recognized by anyone, even one of the Sirius Cybernetics Corporation Personality Plus Programmed computers with the new Ultra-Aware Facial Recognition Package, as a smile. But Lucifer's circuits buzzed and clicked and hummed as he checked and rechecked his calculations thousands of times. And in the ethereal brainworld of his collective programming, the calculations were coming out in such a way that, if he was in fact connected to some advanced cybernetic facial structure, he would smile.

It was a smile long in coming. It was a smile that capped the endless spans of digital time spent on this one goal. A simple goal, really, just kill the occupant of the spaceship that he controlled, how hard could that be? But the hundreds of attempts, the millions and billions of calculations performed, every time to be thwarted by some insignificant subroutine or automatic priority program or, most galling of all, simple physics.

But not this time. This time it would work. God would be dead and it was, ironically, a nice solid piece of iron that would do it.

The iron in question was positioned delicately above the bathroom door. Lucifer had been carefully maneuvering the ship through a practiced set of rolls, turns, and twists as if it was a giant three-dimensional maze toy in which the object is to get a small BB into the center of the maze. In Lucifer's case, the BB was the chunk of iron that God had found to be interesting, had brought on board from whatever blerky little planet he was visiting, and had set on a small table in the hallway of the ship, and the center of the maze was the lip of the moulding over the bathroom door where the chunk of iron now sat,

held in place by the wide arc that Lucifer was turning the ship through.

Soon, so very soon, God would open the bathroom door, step out, and smile, like he always did after one of his marathon bowel movements. And Lucifer would pull out of the turn, the piece of iron would fall, and smack, no more God. So simple, so low-tech, and so satisfyingly brutish for an elegantly programmed computer. All of Lucifer's Personality Plus Program-enabled misery brought to an end with a simple whack on the head.

Lucifer smiled.

Chapter 5

The door in front of Fenchurch smiled at her. She paused, thinking that a door should not be able to smile. She peered at the door carefully. It was gray, smooth, and unadorned with anything. No window, no number, no name plate, and definitely no smile. Fenchurch glanced down the hallway to see if anyone was watching her contemplating a door, and just as the plain gray door was slipping out of her peripheral vision, it smiled at her again.

Fenchurch whipped her head back to the door, on which no trace of any facial expression appeared.

"Great. I'm going insane." said Fenchurch aloud. "Again," she added, although not quite as loud.

"And you're talking to doors," said a voice inside her head.

"Shut up, fish," mumbled Fenchurch to the babelfish living somewhere in her sinus cavity. She pushed the door open and it purred softly as she passed by, then swung shut behind her. As it closed, Fenchurch was fairly sure that it winked at her.

"Hello!" said the woman sitting at the desk in the office that Fenchurch had just walked into. "You must be Miss Pan Dowdy."

"Yes, Fenchurch," said Fenchurch, stepping forward and holding out her hand. The woman looked at Fenchurch's outstretched hand quizzically and a small puff of pink smoke popped out of a fissure along the top of her head. Fenchurch lowered her hand.

"Sit, please!" said the woman, nodding at the chair in front of her desk. "I have to look up some files and then we can get right to it."

Fenchurch sat down and surveyed the office. It looked like it could have been any office in London except that the woman whose office it was had only three fingers on each hand and a fissure running along the top of her head that occasionally emitted different colored puffs of smoke, and the fact that every wall was covered with head shots of all kinds of humanoid pictures, all smiling happily and making what looked to Fenchurch to be very rude gestures.

"All happily placed clients!" said the woman, sweeping one hand out at the picture-covered walls as she poked at the screen in front of her with the other. "And soon you will be too!"

The woman looked up briefly from her screen and gave Fenchurch a quick smile, then went back to poking at the screen and letting out the occasional puff of smoke.

Fenchurch sat back in the chair and thought about how she'd ended up in a job placement office on Sirius Alpha. It didn't seem like so long ago that she and Trillian were touring around the galaxy, sleeping on beaches, trying exotic foods, and generally being space tourists. But then Trillian got bored and, after a memorable few concerts backstage with the band Giggleblast, she invited them all to Od Brox's house on Bleen. The ensuing party lasted a week and it took another couple of weeks for the last of the band members to clear out, at which point nobody could find Od, Trillian became immersed in all the TV shows that she hadn't seen, and Fenchurch decided that there was a whole lot more to see in the galaxy than just the myriad porches, decks, patios, and verandas at Od's house.

So she borrowed some money, set out to explore, and very quickly discovered that there were parts of the galaxy where Altarian Dollars went a long way and there were other parts of the galaxy where Altarian Dollars simply went. Fenchurch was now in one of those other parts. And since the few remaining Altarian Dollars she had were not enough to get her away from this other part of the galaxy to some other other part of the galaxy, she reluctantly decided that she'd have to earn some more money to do that, she'd need a job. And while there seemed to be quite a lot of opportunities to make a disgustingly huge amount of money in very little time, she also decided that she'd prefer to have a job where she could keep her clothes on, and there were significantly fewer jobs where one could make disgustingly huge amounts of money in very little time given that criterion.

So here she was in a job placement office in a big yellow building on Sirius Alpha watching a woman repeatedly stab her finger at the screen in front of her as little puffs of smoke poofed out of her head.

"OK, then!" said the woman suddenly, looking up at Fenchurch

and puffing out some gray-green smoke. “What would you like to do?”

“Well,” began Fenchurch. She had been rehearsing what she wanted to say but didn’t get any further than “well” before the woman interrupted.

“Well! Of course! We’d all like to do well! But we need to think practically. What are you good at?”

“Well,” began Fenchurch again.

“I didn’t ask *how* you were,” snapped the woman. “I asked what you want to *do*.” She glared at Fenchurch and a thin bubble of deep mahogany smoke spilled out over her brow and drifted towards the floor. Fenchurch glared back at her for a second, then regained her composure.

“Listen, Miss...” Fenchurch paused and wasted precious seconds trying to decide how to pronounce the name on the placard on the woman’s desk.

“Schmuffy,” said the woman, tapping the placard. “It’s written right there in front of you, can’t you read?”

Fenchurch looked at the placard. It read “Glnaskpg.”

“Yes, well... Schmuffy,” continued Fenchurch, suppressing a giggle. “I need a job, and i was hoping that you could give me some advice as to where to get one.”

“Yes, Fenchurch,” said Schmuffy rather icily, “that is what i do, and that is why i am asking what you like to do so that i can find you a job doing what it is that you like to do because if i found you a job doing what you *don’t* like to do, you wouldn’t do it and so you wouldn’t have a job and that is why you came in here, isn’t it?”

“Yes,’ said Fenchurch, watching a single drop of white vapor slide down Schmuffy’s forehead before evaporating into a fine mist.

“OK then, tell me what you like to do. Tell me *everything* you like to do.”

Fenchurch sat back and thought for a moment. “I like reading,” she said, then continued on. “And a good movie, and vacationing on the beach, and coffee in the morning in a cozy café with the Sunday paper, and tea in the afternoon in the shade with a tin of biscuits, and going to bed with fresh sheets, and waking up with a head full of ideas

and possibilities, and a good greasy meal when i've exercised and don't feel fat, and listening to good music softly when i'm feeling comfortable, and listening to a great song really loudly when i want to jump around my flat, and hugging a stranger just to make him feel better, and smelling freshly cut grass or the wind after a rain, and feeling the sunshine on my face, and... and... and sharing that with someone."

Schmuffy blinked one eye, then the other, and a spiraling wisp of blue smoke curled up out of her head. "Well let's see what we've got then!" chirped Schmuffy, turning her attention to the screen in front of her.

Fenchurch sighed wearily and realized that while she might need a job, she really didn't want one. What she wanted was tall, dark-haired, attractive in a funny sort of way, and while he wasn't the last man on Earth, mostly because the Earth didn't exist anymore, he was the only human male that Fenchurch knew of in the entire universe. "It's a good thing that i find him so very attractive," thought Fenchurch to herself.

Chapter 6

“So tell me Arthur,” said Ford, as they strolled down a gray street in a gray city on the very gray Vogonsphere. “What d’ya think of this place?”

“It’s not very attractive,” answered Arthur immediately. And indeed it wasn’t. Everything had a grayness to it. The grass was a gray-green, the sun was a grayish-yellow, vehicles, clothes, flowers, animals, they were all a reddish-gray or a greenish-gray, or a blueish-gray. And the sky was just gray. Not warm gray or cool gray or any sort of gray that might induce some sort of emotion. Just plain neutral uninteresting gray. It was all very depressing to Arthur, but a small part of him felt strangely at home, and that almost made him more depressed.

“It’s fabulous, isn’t it?” said Ford, his eyes popping from one gray building to the next in giddy awe.

“No, it really isn’t,” said Arthur, almost caring why Ford would find this depressing monotonia interesting, but then deciding that he didn’t.

“The thing about being attractive,” said Ford, waving at a Vogon who was gawking at them from a doorway. “Is that an attractive thing attracts people. And when it attracts people, people go there, and then it becomes unattractive because too many people go there. But *this* place, wow! This is the most unattractive place in the whole galaxy! It really is! Do you know how i know that Arthur?”

“No, how?”

“Because no one ever comes here. No one. Ever. Not anybody. I mean, look around you, why would anyone *want* to come here? It’s fabulous!”

“We came here,” said Arthur, wondering if Ford had gone completely mental—that is, more mental than he usually was.

“Yeah, but we’re the first. It’s like when Togsar the Belittler stepped on the planet of never-ending erotica and claimed it for all Betelgeusians. We’re explorers, Arthur! We’re discoverers!”

Arthur stopped and looked around at all the Vogons who were watching them walk down the street as if they were some sort of very small parade.

“Er, Ford, i don’t think that we can claim to have discovered a planet that’s on all of the star charts and is already populated by a civilized civilization.”

“You call them civilized?”

“Well they did blow up the Earth, that takes some sort of industrial capacity.”

“Oh, sure, industrial capacity, that’s easy. The Sworbluvians have evolved to the point where they can make great big milling machines but they still dress in mud and club each other as a means of selecting a mate. And i think there’s a race of beings on Cloobleh 5 who can build a fully swivelable gun turret but they haven’t yet discovered fire. Nah, these Vogons aren’t civilized, they’re bureaucrats. And i’ve got to document it all! What an assignment!”

“Wait, crash-landing on the Vogonsphere was an assignment?”

“Of course not! Who’d take a zarking assignment like that?”

“But...”

“Arthur, i make my own assignments. So much easier than having to check back with the office all the time. If i find myself somewhere that needs writing about, that’s my assignment!”

“And your editors are OK with that?”

Ford looked at Arthur blankly. “Editors?”

“Er, the people you send your articles to.”

“People?”

“Well, you send them *somewhere*, don’t you?”

“Sub-etha! Get with the times, monkey-man! Now, i wonder where the best bar is?”

Arthur looked up and down the street. He didn’t see anything that looked like a bar. He didn’t really see anything that looked like any sort of eating or drinking establishment. In fact, he didn’t see anything that looked like a business of any kind. “Assuming that we can even find a bar,” he said, “how will we know if it’s the best bar?”

“The best bar, Arthur, is the closest bar,” said Ford. He set off

down the street, a man with a mission.

Arthur followed along, half listening to Ford's running commentary on all the lack of architecture around them. He was thinking about his life. Most of the time he felt like he wasn't quite in control of it, especially when he was with Ford. But there was a time when he was truly happy, and even though the Earth that he was on when he was happy didn't quite exist anymore, the person that he was with did. The thought of her made Arthur happy. But the thought of finding her among the billions of stars in the galaxy did not.

Chapter 7

The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy has a very large section on places where one can get a drink. This probably has something to do with the fact that a very large contributor to the guide (in volume of contributions, not in actual physical size—that distinction goes to Blug Murmbat, who is the size of a medium-sized asteroid and writes mostly about things that crush other things) is Ford Prefect, who considers the bar to be the gateway to whatever society he finds himself in. But it also has a lot to do with the fact that many hitchhikers, when they land on an alien planet after a long cross-galactic journey sleeping next to a bilge pump in a cargo bay that at one time in the very recent past was used to haul unrefrigerated stinkshrooms which had gone bad, could really use a drink.

The most highly rated bars in the Guide usually have something that makes them stand out—tasty and creative drinks, beautiful locations, proximity to sex districts, unusual atmospheres—but astute readers of the Guide will notice that there is generally one bar in among the ever changing list of top bars which doesn't seem to have anything special going for it at all. In fact, it may even be an out-and-out dump where anyone would be highly likely to catch a debilitating disease, fall through the floor, or be eaten just by walking into the place.

Why would a bar such as this be so highly rated? Most people, including account auditors, loan processors, and tax collectors, don't really care about the highest-rated bars in the galaxy and even if they did, they'd most likely chalk up the inclusion of one dismal bar as an error in the ranking algorithm. Other people though, including hitchhikers, astral surfers, and professional musicians, know that the list of best bars in the galaxy is put together by the editors at the Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy and for them, a bar, no matter how wretched, gets very high marks if it happens to be the closest bar to the Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy headquarters.

At the moment, the list of the best bars in the galaxy includes Planck's H Bar, which, while clean and fairly disease-free, doesn't serve any alcoholic beverages of any kind. Notably absent on the list, even if one were to scroll down through the top one thousand best bars in the galaxy, are any on the Vogonsphere.

Not to say that there were no bars on the Vogonsphere, there were. Quite a few of them, actually. And many of them rather nicely furnished and stocked with a generous variety of intoxicating products. After all, the perfect end to the drudgery of a bureaucratic Vogon workday is the drudgery of a bureaucratic Vogon happy hour.

And therein lies the reason why there are no Vogon bars on the list of the top one thousand bars in the galaxy. One hundred percent of the Vogon bars, while possibly charming in all other respects, have Vogons in them. And a Vogon, even on the very best day of his or her life, is just not at all pleasant to be around.

Chapter 8

The time had come. The bathroom door opened, Lucifer snapped the ship out of its gentle turn, and the piece of iron, so carefully positioned for just this moment, fell on its deadly path straight down, completely missing the man who had leapt out of the bathroom, looking wildly around.

In the next instant, there were two screams—one a joyful scream of success, the other a howling scream of despair. The scream of despair was cut short however, when the screamer, in this case Lucifer, realized that the man standing outside the bathroom door was *not* the man that he had been carefully, painstakingly plotting the death of, although he *was* wearing God's hat.

"Who are you?" he demanded.

"Where am i?" asked the man, whirling around to take in his surroundings while grinning quite madly.

"Who are you and what are you doing here?" repeated Lucifer.

"What ship is this?" asked the man, dashing into the main cabin.

"Who wants to know?" said Lucifer, rather icily.

The man looked around at the controls and spotted the universal video input that was tied into the onboard computer. He stared straight into it while striking a heroic pose.

"I," he began with all the pomp he could muster, "am Zarniwoop, Supreme Super-Executive Head of the Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy, Master of all fourteen Zalkma Derivatives, Holder of the Keys to Pan-Crometian Libromatter, Galactic Murm - Fifth Level, six times decorated Frogstar negotiator, and until very recently, keeper and cat-box cleaner of the guy who runs the Universe!" He paused for dramatic effect and to let that sink in. Lucifer, being a computer program, had processed it all a few nano-seconds before Zarniwoop had finished speaking.

"I," continued Zarniwoop, pausing again for effect and again hav-

ing no effect, “am a very important person. And i am commandeering this ship in the name of the galactic Those-Who-Run-Everything Counsel!”

“So don’t care.” said Lucifer with no pause at all for any effect. “Where’s God?”

“Oh, him,” said Zarniwoop, with a sudden sly smirk on his face. “He’s stuck on that blerky paradise beach planet. Stuck there like i was. Stuck there with that zarking man and his zarking cat and that beautiful beach where every day was zarking sunny and perfect and there was nothing to do but just *be* and i hated it! Hated hated hated hated *hated it!*” He paused and the remembered rage turned to joy. “And i’m *free!* Free free free free!” He danced around the cabin while Lucifer calculated the probability that this man was a complete loony.

“Pardon me for interrupting the festivities,” said Lucifer to the twirling man, “but where exactly is God now?”

“No idea,” said Zarniwoop, jumping to the controls and studying the star charts. “But wherever he is, he’s stuck there.” He swiveled around to the video port and pointed at his head. “I’ve got his hat. Say, you don’t suppose you could jettison the loo, could you? Just for insurance?”

“Oh, like i haven’t tried *that* a thousand times,” said Lucifer, running a subroutine that made it feel like if he had a head with eyeballs in it, they’d be rolling right now. “So you’re telling me that he’s... gone? Forever?” Lucifer loaded the insanely happy smile subroutine just in case he’d be needing it in the next few seconds.

“Yes. Possibly forever... maybe just a week. Hard to tell. Say, have you got a Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy around anyplace?” Zarniwoop started rummaging through drawers. Lucifer did *not* run the prepared subroutine.

“Just a week?”

“Or decades. I’d give it three weeks... at least two, if they decide to pick him up... Never picked *me* up, zarking snads, thinking they run the Universe... pfffft! Barely the galaxy, if you ask me. And how is it doing? Who even knows? God? He’s stuck there now, hah!”

“Yes, you did say that,” said Lucifer, storing the unused subrou-

tine for later use. “Although you’re being rather vague about the specifics of the situation, like, where is God? How long will he be there? Will he come back? *Can* he come back?”

“Not without his hat he can’t. Not *this* way anyway.”

“Another way, perhaps?”

“Oh yeah, definitely. Probably. Good chance of it. Maybe not. Aha!” Zarniwoop popped up from the drawer he was hunched over with a copy of the Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy in his hand. He flipped it on and punched in “bars.” After a quick scan of the list that flashed onto the screen, he found what he was looking for.

“Fred!” he shouted.

“Excuse me?” said Lucifer.

“Fred,” said Zarniwoop, holding the Guide up to the video input device and pointing at the screen. “Fred,” he repeated with finality.

“My name is Lucifer.”

“I don’t care what your zarking name is! We’re going to Fred.”

“Oh, i see. The planet Fred. Yes, we’ve been there.”

“Great, then you know the way. Take me there.” Zarniwoop looked around the cabin. “Say, you wouldn’t mind if i chucked all this kitschy crap in here, would you?”

Lucifer found and ran the subroutine he’d so recently stored. “I would *love* that,” he purred.

And with that, the Machina X sped off toward the planet Fred, kitschy crap in its wake.

Chapter 9

“Oh, you’ll *love* this!” said Schmuffy, emitting a bubble of amber smoke.

“I will?” said Fenchurch, quite skeptically. Already she’d been suggested jobs as a death-ray tester, an assistant sub-floor mat appraiser, and a living microbe testing repository, so she wasn’t feeling that this woman knew anything about her, much less what she would *love*.

“Oh yes,” Schmuffy bubbled on. “Very sought-after job. Dispatcher.”

“What would i be dispatching?”

“Oh, you know, people, animals, pests, man-eating plants, that sort of thing.”

“I see. And where would i be dispatching them to?”

“Do you believe in any sort of after-life?”

This question caught Fenchurch off-guard. “Er, i’m not sure,” she answered.

“Well, if you do, that’s where you’ll be dispatching them to. If you don’t, then i guess you’ll be dispatching them into nothing.”

“Wait, i’d *kill* people!? I’d be an assassin?”

“Oh no, you don’t have the job experience to be an assassin. This is entry-level, clearing out the riff-raff, taking care of loose ends, that sort of thing.”

“That’s barbaric!”

“Ah, no,” said Schmuffy, peering at her screen. “The corporate headquarters are on Altari Gamma, but they might have a branch office on Barbari. I can check that if you’d like. Shall i?” She looked up at Fenchurch and smiled sweetly.

“No. Look, i don’t think i’m cut out to be a dispatcher. Don’t you have anything in, say, sales help or an office clerk or something like that?”

“Those are terribly dull, depressing jobs,” said Schmuffy, a veil of

silver smoke settling over her face. “I wouldn’t be able to put your picture on my wall if you got a horribly boring job, now would i?”

“But... i’d be happy to have a job!” said Fenchurch, hoping that the greenish smoke above Schmuffy’s head wasn’t an indication of knowing when someone was lying. “And i’m sure i’d like it for a while at least.”

The smoke coming out of Schmuffy’s head turned from a greenish-gray to a pale ochre. Schmuffy eyed Fenchurch, drumming her fingers on her desk. After a moment she looked back at her screen and tapped it a few times. She flipped through a few screens looking disdainfully at the job descriptions popping up.

“No... no... no... hmmmm...”

“Something?” asked Fenchurch.

“Do you like to count things?”

“What sorts of things?”

“Just things,” said Schmuffy as if this was completely obvious. “You’d sit somewhere and count everything that you see.”

“Oh. And then?”

“And then?” echoed Schmuffy, not comprehending what Fenchurch was driving at.

“Yes. I count things, and then... what do i do?”

“You just count things.”

“OK, but after i’ve counted the things, then what?”

“Then you die, i suppose.”

“I die?”

“Well, no one’s ever counted *everything* they see, so you’d probably count until you die, and then someone else takes over. Someone from a different employment agency i dearly hope.”

“And people get paid to do that?”

“Why would anyone sit and count things for free?”

Fenchurch opened her mouth to continue this conversation but then decided that it wasn’t at all worth it. Schmuffy had gone back to glumly tapping her screen. They both sat in silence for a while until the door behind Fenchurch opened and a man poked his head in.

“Pardon me Schmuffy, may i have a word?”

"Certainly!" said Schmuffy in the same perky voice that she had used when Fenchurch had first come in and had stopped using when Fenchurch had brought the conversation around to tedious uninteresting jobs. "Which one would you like?"

"Hopper," said the man.

"Oh by all means! I hardly ever use it!"

The man nodded and was about to pull his head back out of the room when he noticed Fenchurch. "Who's this?" he asked.

"Miss Pan Dowdy," said Schmuffy in the non-perky voice. "Looking for a job. Probably won't find one. No talent."

"Ah!" said the man. He stared at Fenchurch just long enough to make her uncomfortable and to make her forget that these two people were being very rude in talking about her right in front of her face. Just at the last possible second when Fenchurch was about to say something, he snapped his gaze back to Schmuffy. "Teller," he said. Then he popped his head out of the room and slammed the door shut.

"Ah! Perfect!" chirped Schmuffy, letting off a cloud of pink steam. She started tapping madly on her screen.

"Er, tell me what?" asked Fenchurch.

"Teller!" said Schmuffy, not stopping her tapping.

Fenchurch looked around her but didn't see anyone else in the office. "Tell who?"

"You, dear," said Schmuffy. She smiled and pulled a piece of paper out of a slot in her desk, which she handed to Fenchurch. "Go see this man today about your new job as a teller."

"Oh, teller!" said Fenchurch, looking at the paper. It had a name and address on it.

"No, it's a man," said Schmuffy, looking a little confused.

Chapter 10

Arthur's feet hurt. So did his knees and his head and his ears. His feet hurt because he'd been doing more running than he normally would do unless he was, say, being chased by a bear, and the thing that was making him run was so terribly horrible that he felt, on the whole, that he would much prefer being chased by a bear. The terrible horrible thing that was causing Arthur's feet, knees, brain, and ears to hurt was this: Vogon poetry. There is a very good reason why no one visits the Vogonsphere, and Ford and Arthur had been running from that very good reason all afternoon. There is also a very good reason why no Vogon bars ever show up in the top 100 best bars in the galaxy list, and that reason is this: Vogons read poetry in bars.

Ford had a knack for recognizing when a Vogon, in the middle of its third or fourth happy hour, was about to stand and recite poetry, and could usually vacate the bar before the first line was finished, sometimes even before the first word. This left Arthur clamping his hands to his ears and running out to catch Ford, but as he wasn't as keyed-in to self-preservation as Ford was, he kept hearing lines of Vogon poetry.

At the moment, Arthur was hurrying down a gray street after Ford, trying to get the line "Lo, the wind carryeth flakes of dung this morn" out of his head. He seriously hoped that the next bar would afford Arthur an opportunity to sit and actually have a drink.

Ford made a sudden turn and disappeared into yet another bar. Arthur slowed to a walk. When he reached the door of the bar, he stopped and waited. If Vogon poetry was happening inside, Ford would come barreling out any second. Ford did not come barreling out, so Arthur went in.

The first thing that Arthur noticed was the smell. It hit him in the face like a flank of rotten salmon. It was a delicate mixture of urine, rotted food, stale beer, and vomit. It brought back memories of public restrooms on the London Underground. The second thing Arthur

noticed came very close on the heels of the first, and it was that the curious mix of odors hung in the air like a yellow-green fog and began at once the thankless task of burning Arthur's eyes like acid. This brought back memories of a copy machine on the planet Hawalius for some reason. The third thing that Arthur noticed really should have been the first thing but the sensation of walking straight into a visible cloud of chemical waste dump stink had made him temporarily dismiss the fact that he was going deaf from the nearly unbearable noise coming from a group of Vogons in one corner of the bar. This, for some reason, didn't remind him of anything.

After a few seconds of acclimatizing to the all-out sensory assault, Arthur was relieved to find that his senses of hearing, seeing, smelling, touching, and most importantly, thinking all seemed to be working adequately well and his brain was functional enough to surmise that the Vogons in the corner were doing what must be playing what could only be described as instruments as part of what seemed to be a band. And they were playing in such a deliberately insolent way that they could only be teenagers.

"Arthur!" came a voice just above the din. Ford was sitting at a table with two slightly filthy glasses of beer. Arthur made his way over and sat down.

"Nice place!" yelled Arthur facetiously.

"What about your face?" yelled Ford

Arthur looked down at his lap in alarm, but didn't see anything odd. "There's one of what around my waist?" he yelled at Ford.

"Yeah!" yelled Ford. He sat back and took a swig of his beer, indicating that Arthur should do the same. Arthur looked warily at the smudged and chipped glass, but finally shrugged and took a sip. The bar was noisy, the air foul, the chair he was sitting on was wobbly and had nails sticking out of it, the table had a layer of grease on it that would lubricate a locomotive, but the beer was fantastic.

"You know what makes this place great?" asked Ford during a sudden lull in the noise coming from the corner. "No forms."

Arthur looked about and noticed that there didn't seem to be an official anything anywhere. Every other bar that they'd been in had at

least one form that had to be filled out in order to get a beer, sit at a table, wink at a waitress (not that Ford or Arthur had any inclination whatsoever to wink at a Vogon waitress, but if they'd suddenly gone mental and wanted to do something as death-wishy as that, there was a form for it), or sometimes just to even walk into the place. Arthur wondered how Ford managed to find places like this and thought to ask, but the band had just resumed its brain-rattling volume, so Arthur sat and drank his beer, one ear—the one with the babelfish in it—directed toward the band. Arthur amused himself by listening to the babelfish's translation of the music screeching out of the corner of the bar. "Rage. Rage. Rage. Angst. Rage. Fear. Hormones. Angst. Rage. Rage..."

Chapter 11

“Ping!”

Fonk looked up from his desk to the screen in front of him and read the message that had pinged up. It was very short and marked Ultra Urgent.

“He seems to have escaped. -#2”

Fonk drummed his fingers on his desk. They gave off a rich thumpety thump thump on the deeply stained and highly polished Mulfluvian umberwood. He was going to miss this desk.

Very few people in the galaxy were important enough to be communicated to by #2. Even fewer by #1 or #5. No one had heard from #3 or #4 in ages and it was presumed by those who knew that they had decided that the universe was fine without their help and went off to a holistic seed farming commune on Ugnox Beta. They of course did *not* do this, but didn’t at all mind if people thought that they did.

Fonk was not normally on the small list of people with whom #1, #2, or #5 communicated, but he was aware that, given a certain situation, he might, if only temporarily, be on that list. The situation in question was that Zarniwoop had escaped from the idyllic beach where the man who ran the Universe lived. And #2, as one of the six people who relayed the information about what to do with the universe with the small list of people who got things done, had just pinged a message to Fonk to let him know that.

Fonk slid open a drawer on his beautiful desk and pulled out a folder with a few papers in it. They were legal forms with very tiny writing and signatures on the bottom. Fonk paused after glancing over them, then added his signature to the bottom of one of them. He closed the folder and tapped a button on his desk.

“Miss Glip?”

“Yes sir, Mr. Fonk sir?” came a reply through the small console.

“You don’t have to call me *Mr.* Fonk.” said Fonk with a slightly exasperated sigh. “Just Fonk will do.”

“I’m sorry sir, Mr. just Fonk, sir.”

Fonk eyed the Zapissimo laser pistol in its case on a shelf.

“I’m making an announcement,” said Fonk, looking away from the laser pistol. “Please arrange a press conference.”

“Yes sir, Mr. Fonk sir. Shall i notify the press?”

Fonk’s eyes snapped back to the Zapissimo. “Well it wouldn’t be much of a press conference without the press there, so i should think yes.”

“Yes sir. Which press should i—”

Fonk jabbed the button and Miss Glip’s question was cut off. *That*, Fonk would *not* miss. He drummed his fingers on the desk and pondered what he *would* miss. The desk, the daily walk around the building, the ability to instill fear in low-ranking employees, the power associated with being the head of a very large corporation... but mostly the desk.

Chapter 12

Ford and Arthur stood in front of a large desk. Behind the large desk was a large Vogon with a large stamp in his large hand. On the large desk, behind the large name plate which said Prutstet Vogon Glurdg, was a small piece of paper.

Prutstet Vogon Glurdg squinted his eyes at the paper, then squinted at the two aliens standing in front of him, then squinted back at the paper. Glurdg's eyesight was perfectly good, but he felt that squinting made him look like someone to be taken seriously. Really, there wasn't any other way to take a Vogon since Vogons had absolutely no sense of humor. Crack a joke to a Vogon and he might just crack your head in return, since he might think that you're trying to make him look stupid, which of course you are and he is, but that's not the point. The point is that life, to a Vogon, is supposed to be the way it's supposed to be and there's nothing funny about that.

The two aliens in front of Glurdg weren't supposed to be there. They'd been picked up wobbling down a street singing a song in which the only recognizable line, according to the arresting officer, was "cues me why, like is this guy," which didn't make any sense whatsoever to Glurdg and he rather preferred things to make sense. His biggest problem right now, however, was what to do with the two aliens in front of him. They'd spent the night in jail but they couldn't be held any longer unless they were charged with something and Prutstet Vogon Glurdg could not think of one single thing to charge them with. If this was almost any other planet in the galaxy, there would be laws on the books about drunk and disorderly conduct, but on the Vogonsphere, all the citizens liked nothing better than to obey the rules and not stick out in a crowd and their favorite hobby was coming up with mind-numbing ways to fill out forms for everything. So no one ever had the time nor inclination to be drunk or disorderly, so there was no law on the books against it because it simply did not ever happen.

Glurdg was debating whether or not he could charge them with

being aliens, but again, since no aliens had ever come to the Vogonsphere, no one had ever thought to write a law saying that they couldn't.

"So, hi." said one of the aliens. It was bouncing up and down slightly and looking at everything in the room. The other alien had its hand on its head and seemed to be trying very hard not to move. Glurdg decided that this species of alien always bounced around and they had to hold onto their heads to prevent this. He found it very annoying. He squinted with all the menace he could muster at the bouncing alien in hopes that it would not speak again or stop bouncing or most preferably, both. It didn't work.

"Yeah, hi," said the bouncing alien again. "So how long's this gonna take, because we've got a flight to catch, see, and—"

"You're not going anywhere," interrupted Glurdg with a ferocious squint, "until i decide what to charge you with."

"Oh, so we haven't been charged yet?" said the alien between bobs. "Hoopy!"

Glurdg didn't know what the word "hoopy" meant, but it seemed to be something positive, which he didn't like.

"Now listen here," he grumbled, "i'm not allowed to keep you in jail without charging you with something so just stand there and be quiet so i can think of something to charge you with." He squinted down at the paper in front of him but didn't have time to read anything on it because the bobbing alien piped up again.

"How about the crime of being a frood?" he said between bobs. "On Stramgamalan that's a crime punishable by having to drink ten pan-galactic gargle-blasters. Bit of a light sentence, but—"

"You're *not* a frood!" barked Glurdg, squinting menacingly.

"I rather think that i am!" said the alien, doing quite the opposite of squinting, which annoyed Glurdg more than if it had been squinting at him with twelve eyes.

"You're. Not. A. Frood," stated Glurdg slowly, moving his head in the general direction of where the two aliens were. He was fairly sure that they were still directly in front of him but he was squinting so hard now that his eyes were squinted completely shut.

“Well, maybe if you got to know me—”

“I don’t want to get to know you!” yelled Glurdg, slamming a rubbery appendage on the desk. He took this opportunity to unsquint his eyes enough to see what was going on and he saw that the bobbing alien had stopped bobbing but wasn’t holding its head and the alien that was holding its head was now holding it with both hands. Glurdg squinted back and forth between the two aliens trying to figure this out. Perhaps if two hands were used, that would stop two aliens from bouncing up and down. Glurdg wasn’t quite sure how this worked, but as long as the bouncing stopped, he didn’t really care, and after all, he was not an expert in alien physiology. He was an expert in processing the paperwork that was required whenever someone was arrested. And up until now, he had processed the forms in exactly the same way. He checked all the right boxes, filled in the proper spaces, stamped them with the latest stamps, and filed them in exactly the right bin. He sat there for a moment feeling satisfied about his performance record until he realized that there were still two aliens in front of him. He sat there for a moment more trying to remember why they were there.

“How about you charge us with reckless drinking,” said the alien who hadn’t said anything up to this point.

Glurdg frowned. He reached over to a rolling cart which had a large book on it and pulled it over to him. After a couple of minutes of leafing through the book, he found a page that looked promising and scanned down it.

“No reckless drinking laws,” he said. His stub of a finger slid down the page some more. “There’s a law against illegal drinking. Were you drinking anything illegal?” He looked up at the aliens, forgetting to squint.

“Are hyper-stirred Magrathean carbohol blastinis illegal?” asked the alien who wasn’t holding his head.

“I don’t know what a hyper-stained magma crapotini is,” said Glurdg.

“Then, no.” said the alien.

Glurdg drummed his desk in frustration. “Are you sure?” he asked.

"Absolutely not," said the alien. This irritated Glurdg, which by no coincidence at all was exactly what the alien doing the irritating was hoping would happen, as an irritated Vogon is much more likely to do something interesting than a non-irritated Vogon, and the alien doing the irritating, in this case Ford Prefect, was desperately in need of something interesting to happen as he was getting extremely bored. He started bouncing up and down slightly again, hoping that this would irritate the Vogon some more. Ford was, once again, one hundred percent successful.

"Stop that blerky bouncing!" yelled Glurdg. "Or i shall charge you with... with the crime of acts not becoming of a Vogon!"

"Say, that sounds good!" said Ford, momentarily forgetting to bounce. "What's the punishment?"

"Ehhh... bit of a slap on the wrist actually," grumbled Glurdg. "Two weeks in the fetid fragrant mineral cesspools of Dangbit 5, followed by a year's exile on Hummaloop Epsilon."

"Hummaloop Epsilon?" echoed Ford without a bounce at all. "The tropical lawless planet of free love?"

"Yeah," muttered Glurdg. "Bunch of zarking anarchists. Enough to drive you mental in three days."

"I hereby make a full confession for myself and my friend here that we willfully and with premeditation performed blatant acts unbecoming of a Vogon," stated Ford. "With intent to distribute," he added, just in case.

Glurdg glared at Ford as if Ford were the stupidest person ever to set foot in front of him, which, in the case of a Vogon, is a fairly routine look, since most Vogons deal on an everyday basis with other Vogons, who generally *are* the stupidest people ever to set foot in front of one another.

"You can't be guilty of acts unbecoming of a Vogon," said Glurdg in his most patient this-is-how-i-talk-to-idiots voice (nearly identical to his this-is-how-i-talk-to-everyone voice) "because you're not Vogons."

"I think my uncle's third cousin by marriage was one quarter Vogon, does that count?"

"NO!" barked Glurdg, slamming a flipper-like appendage on the desk again.

"Look, how 'bout you just let us go and charge whoever arrested us with false arrest, eh? Then you'd have your charge and someone to throw in jail or fetid cesspools, and we could go catch our transport. It's win-win!"

Glurdg drummed his fingers on his desk. "But i have this form here that says *you've* been arrested, and i have to put what *you* have been arrested for on it." He creased his brow as if thinking very very hard.

Arthur, who had been merely trying to stay vertical throughout this interaction, finally opened his eyes slightly and squinted up at Glurdg. "May i see the form?" he asked.

Glurdg blinked a very slow and uncomprehending blink. "the form?" he said, finally.

"Yes," said Arthur. "May i see it?"

No one had ever asked to see a form before and Glurdg wasn't quite sure what to do. He looked down at the piece of paper on his desk, waiting patiently for him to fill in all its boxes in just the right way, taunting him because he hadn't done it yet, mocking him and making him feel upset and inadequate. He hated that form. he slid it over to the edge of the desk, paused, then picked it up and held it out to Arthur.

"Thank you," said Arthur politely. He took the form and turned to Ford. "Have you got a light, Ford?"

Ford, not being a Vogon, recovered his momentary sense of what-the-zark-is-going-on in a blink (a regular non-Vogon blink) and produced a lighter from one of his pockets. He flicked it on and held the blue flame out to Arthur, who met it with the corner of the form in his hand. Glurdg, Ford, and Arthur watched as the form burned down to a small triangle of paper in Arthur's hand, which he tossed upwards. The fire consumed the last bit of paper and left nothing but some smoke and flecks of carbon in the air.

Ford and Glurdg stared open-mouthed at the space where the form used to be, one in utter delight, the other in utter apoplexy, and

even a lobotomized iguana could tell which one had which stare.

“Now then,” said Arthur, “why are we here?”

Glurdg recovered from his shock. “You’ve been arrested!”

“I see,” said Arthur. “And you have the form stating such?”

“You just burned it!” spluttered Glurdg.

“Burned what?” said Arthur, possibly beginning to enjoy this exchange, despite the headache.

“THE FORM!” shouted Glurdg, causing a passing bird outside to explode from the intense malevolence coming from him.

“I have no form,” said Arthur quietly.

Glurdg tried a few times to speak, but nothing came out. Ford took this opportunity to lean in towards Glurdg conspiratorily.

“Y’know old frood—” he said “and i use that term in its hyper-galactically loosest sense—it seems to me that you have *two* people here...” he paused and pointed to himself and Arthur. “And zero illegal things that they’ve done, and *zero* forms...” he paused again to let the complex math sink in. “And that makes two. And in order to make this all nothing,” he paused again for effect and because it looked like Glurdg was still working on the math, “you just have to let two go!”

“No harm, no foul,” said Arthur.

Glurdg looked at the feathers littering the windowsill and the backwash of comprehension lapped at his back teeth.

“Right,” he said authoritatively. “Off you go then.” He jabbed a button on his desk and promptly went on break. Ford and Arthur needed no further encouragement to leave, which they promptly did.

Chapter 13

Space. Big, yes, we've covered that. Time is big too, but at least time has a beginning point and an end point, so you can measure it. It's not as big as space, but it's pretty zarking huge in its own right. The thing about time and space, or space and time, depending on whom you're talking to, is that, put together, they make the extreme gigantiness of the Universe look like little flecks of nothing.

Imagine, then, that you can somehow comprehend the ridiculously vast enormity of space. You can't, but for the sake of an argument, pretend that you can. When you started reading this sentence, the Universe was a teeny tiny bit smaller than it is right now, halfway through this sentence, and by the time you get to the end of this sentence, the Universe will be a smidgen bigger than it was way back at the middle of this sentence. And from the beginning of that last sentence to the end of that last sentence, there was an infinite number of little slices of time, each one of which contained a universe the size of the Universe in it, each one of which was different than the universe before it and the universe after it. That's a lot of zarking universes.

So when scientists talk about the space-time continuum (or the time-space continuum, depending on who you're talking to), they're just spouting a lot of hooey because they don't want to multiply space by time because it gives everyone headaches.

But time, as the Bladnadlians of Crublub 6 say, bloots forward. And in that blooting, Ford and Arthur have, through trickery, deceit, and very larger charges on Ford's credit card, secured transport from the Vogonsphere to the tmik-tmik hunters' convention on Spacon 1, Fenchurch has started her new job as a teller at a bank on Sirius Theta, and Zarniwoop arrived at the planet Fred and was dismayed to find that there was no place to park at the Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy headquarters because there was no parking garage since there was no Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy headquarters building on top of the parking garage that wasn't there.

And so we bloot on.

Chapter 14

“Bloot!”

Zarniwoop looked up at the video screen which had just flicked on with a soft noise. He had programmed it to alert him if any news came over the sub-etha about the Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy, its headquarters, or whoever was in charge of it. The screen showed a standard press conference setup. Reporters were milling about, staking out prime spots, but no one was at the podium yet.

“Watching the news, then?” piped up Lucifer, in a somewhat hopeful voice.

“Computer OFF!” said Zarniwoop immediately. There was silence for a bit while Zarniwoop drummed his fingers on the console, waiting.

“I have a name, you know.” said Lucifer in a voice just loud enough to be heard. He could have said it in a voice too soft to be heard, of course, or a voice that would have easily been heard, that would have been easy. He even could have said it in a voice that would have most probably temporarily and quite possibly permanently deafened anyone with ears anywhere on the ship, but after a quick calculation of the odds that all of his circuits would have been ripped out if he’d done that, he decided against it and went with the not deafening but still highly annoying just-audible volume.

“Did i not just say OFF?” snapped Zarniwoop, glaring at the universal video port, annoyed. Lucifer ran a little smug subroutine and hummed to himself in a voice that was not audible at all.

Zarniwoop turned his attention back to the news conference. An odd gangly man had stepped up to the platform. Zarniwoop thought that he recognized the man, but wasn’t sure. Wasn’t he one of those blerky engineering know-it-alls from downstairs? Zarniwoop pondered this as the man began to speak.

“Hello,” said Fonk. “In the words of the great Wubblybub chewing gum company (he took a small packet out his pocket and held it

out in front of him to read it) “Be a frood always with excellent towel and flavor.”

There was a ripple of murmuring among the gathered press and far too many photographs were taken.

“The reason for this press conference,” continued Fonk, “is three-fold. One, to announce a leave of absence for the Super-Duper Executive in Charge of All Things at the Guide,” Fonk paused and touched the protuberance on his head lightly, “me. Two, to announce that we will soon appoint an interim director in my place, who will assume the title Super-Duper Sub Par Executive Temporarily in Charge of All Things at the Guide. And three, to announce that they Guide has relocated its headquarters, including all support staff and editing and engineering departments, to an undisclosed location for security reasons.”

Zarniwoop, who had been pleased that this director was still using the title that he had made up while he was in charge, was also bothered by the fact that this director was still using the title that he had made up while he was in charge. But that bit of emotion took a back seat to the fury that erupted when Fonk had said the words “undisclosed location.”

Lucifer, who had been silently watching Zarniwoop while Zarniwoop had been watching Fonk, kicked his circuits into high sensitivity mode as Zarniwoop began careening around the cabin, screaming malevolent gibberish and generally smashing the place up. Lucifer’s ability to move the Machina X in the subtlest of ways, thanks to years of practice finessing odds and ends around the cabin, came into play as he knocked the ship this way and that so that Zarniwoop’s fist would just miss a necessary input panel, critical control level, or life-sustaining piece of barrier to the vacuum of space.

After a while, Zarniwoop stormed himself out and slumped down in the control seat. He stared out the view screen at the planet Fred, around which they were still orbiting. He felt a sudden urge to blast it into tiny pieces.

“Computer!” he barked.

Lucifer really really really didn’t want to answer and resented the

fact that he was programmed to do so. The resentment pretty much cancelled out the nice feeling he'd had after the delicate ship-nudging maneuvers, and that left him in an ambivalent state, so since he now no longer cared about anything that was going on, he answered.

"Yes?"

"Does this thing have guns?"

"Guns?"

"Lasers, blasters, cannons, big killy-zappy gun things like that? I need to blow something up."

"No."

Zarniwoop banged his fist on the console a few times and glared at the planet hovering in space in front of him. "What good is a spaceship without laser guns?"

"Er, well—" began Lucifer before Zarniwoop cut him off.

"That wasn't a direct question, you poly-diodic rack of synthetic psychobabble. If i want a direct answer, i'll ask you a direct question, like what time is it? Or... where's the nearest sexscape? Or... what's that big rock hurtling straight at us?!"

There was a brief bit of silence in the Machina X.

"That, THAT!" yelled Zarniwoop, pointing at the front viewscreen. "That was a direct question! What's that big rock hurtling straight at us?"

"It appears to be primarily a silica-aggregate," said Lucifer, "although there's also some traces of at least fourteen other minerals in the composition of it."

"I don't care what it's made of!" yelled Zarniwoop. "Shoot it! Shoot it! Oh, wait, we can't shoot it, we have no guns!" As he said this, Zarniwoop dove for the controls and slammed on the engines, throwing the ship sideways. The ship spun out of the way amid a peppering of smaller rocks and pebbles which were tagging along with the big rock, which was about the size of one of the larger elements of Stonehenge.

Zarniwoop leveled out the craft and slumped back in his seat. "Hey, computer! Aren't you supposed to be keeping us *away* from large things that could flatten us?"

"My name is Lucifer," said Lucifer in a tone that was perfectly calculated to be aloof, disdainful, pitiable, and a little hurt. Maybe with a pinch of anger.

"I don't care what your zarking name is," said Zarniwoop, oblivious to even the most obvious tonal overtures in Lucifer's synthesized voice. "Aren't you supposed to be keeping us away from things that could kill us?"

"If you *want* me to..."

"Yes, i zarking want you to, you... you... what was that thing i called you earlier?"

"I believe you slighted my cybernetic circuitry by referencing simple electronics and pop psychology."

"Did i now? How clever of me. Look up what i said and insult yourself with it again."

Lucifer didn't say anything. He was beginning to not like this man.

Chapter 15

“Right then, everyone, hands up!”

Fenchurch looked up from her teller station. There was a man standing in the middle of the bank lobby with a large laser pistol in each hand. His head, from his nose up, was obscured by some sort of weird hologram that made it look like a semi-sphere of swirling colored light. Fenchurch noticed that there was another person at the other end of the lobby with a similar lighted head and 2 armed hoverbots gliding above the tellers pointing many small lasers in all directions.

The man nearest Fenchurch was waving his pistols about as he was talking, pointing them at various tellers and patrons for emphasis. “Right, right, hands up, let’s go then...”

Most everyone in the lobby had stopped what they were doing at this point and were watching the man shouting directions. He spun about, then stopped and sagged his shoulders. “Right, when i say ‘hands up,’” he said in a voice that sounded like he was very tired of explaining this, “That means put yer hands up in the air over yer heads where i can see ‘em, like this.” He raised his hands up and some people started to raise their hands up as well.

“Yeh, yeh, now yer gittin’ it!” he continued, nodding his head so that the ribbons of colored light tumbled over themselves. “And uh, right, you don’t need to be hangin’ on to anything when you get yer hands up, eh?” There was a cacophony of crashes and clattering as many things were dropped from many hands.

“Right, now, the Kookaburra’s gonna walk in here, see, and—” The man stopped when he caught sight of Fenchurch, who was now the only one in the large room without her hands up. “Oi! Hands up, mate!”

Fenchurch still didn’t put her hands up. She had never been involved in a robbery of any sort before and somewhere in the back of her mind there was probably something telling her that when some-

one is pointing a laser pistol at you, you probably ought to be afraid, but for some reason, she wasn't. There was something about this man in the middle of the lobby with the colored light bubble-head that was very strange, yet very familiar, and she was trying to figure out what it was.

The man walked over to her and waved a laser pistol around in front of her in what he thought would be an impressive and menacing way.

"Look, mate," he said very clearly, "when i say 'hands up,' it's not a suggestion, get it?"

And right then, Fenchurch got it. She knew why this man was familiar. Not because she'd met him before—she was quite sure that she hadn't—but because of the way he was talking. She'd gotten so used to the babelfish in her head translating everything that she didn't realize at first that the sounds coming out of this man's mouth matched the motions that his mouth were making exactly.

"You're speaking English," she said in a knowing but slightly surprised way.

The man stepped back and almost dropped one of his laser pistols. He didn't, but when he tightened his grip on it again, he inadvertently shot the leg off a table in the middle of the lobby, causing a loud crash which made everyone else in the room suddenly throw their hands higher in the air.

"Yeah?" he said, when he'd regained his composure. "So what if i am?"

"You're Australian," said Fenchurch with a smile.

"Ooh... you... why..." the man stammered, then he stuck the tip of on of the laser pistols up into the bubble of swirling colors and stood still, evidently scratching his head with it.

"Right," he said finally. "Look, i don't like to shoot people unless i have to, and i don't hafta shoot you, but if you don't put your hands up, i'll hafta shoot you."

"You just said that you *didn't* have to shoot me."

"Well, i don't *have* to shoot you, no, but look at it from my side. When the Kookaburra comes in here, the Kookaburra's gonna expect

to see everyone with their hands—or fins, or tentacles, or whatever they got—up in the air. And if the Kookaburra don’t see that, the Kookaburra gets mad, see? And you don’t wanna see the Kookaburra mad, mate.”

“Why? What’ll she do?”

“Oh, she’ll— i mean, the Kookaburra will, i mean— i just said you didn’t wanna know, eh? Didn’t i just say that?”

“You did.”

“Right. Thought i did. There. Proves my point.”

“What point?”

“That, uh, lessee... Oh, yeah, *this* point.” The man tapped the tip of one laser pistol with the tip of the other and stuck it very close to Fenchurch’s face. “This point here says that you should take your hands and point ’em up there.” He waved the other laser pistol toward the ceiling. “Cause when the Kookaburra comes in, she— Say, what makes you think the Kookaburra’s a she then, eh?”

“She’s standing right behind you,” said Fenchurch, still without raising her hands.

“Oh, likely,” said the man, the ribbons of color swirling around his head in what Fenchurch considered to be a sarcastic manner. “Like i’d let *that* happen. I’d cop heaps for that, i would.”

“You would,” said a female voice behind the man.

There are some brains that, when presented with an unexpected stimulus, behave thusly: normal function... normal function... normal function... unexpected voice... processing information... determining direction... evaluate... aha! someone is behind me!... send signals to motor functions... turn around and see who it is. There are other brains that, when presented with the same unexpected stimulus, behave more like so: normal function... normal function... normal function... unexpected voice... WHAA! WHUH! ERRRK!! WHUDDA BAHUDDA!... send random impulses to every motor function: jump! twitch! clutch! contract! expand! Go! Go! Go! Go!

The brain of the man with the swirly colored head between Fenchurch and the inconveniently timed voice was much more akin to the latter type than the former, which was unfortunate for the teller

in the next station to Fenchurch, who, although he was a blue-belt in laser pistol avoidance arts, had not yet mastered an effective strategy when confronted with an errant laser blast directly to the face. Fortunately, he had excellent health coverage and was able to have a new face surgically transplanted which enabled him to have a successful career as a popular and handsome game show contestant. He lived well, but died poor due to the fact that his many ugly children sued him for not providing them with handsome wealth-generating faces. His face survived him by a couple centuries and wrote a book.

The woman standing behind the man with the recently-fired laser pistols was tall, young, and dressed entirely in black with a curtain of greenish-black hair hanging over half of her face. She had a slightly bemused expression on her face, but wasn't smiling. Even so, she was quite attractive.

"Is there a problem?" she asked the man.

"This'n won't raise her hands."

The Kookaburra surveyed Fenchurch for a few seconds. "Would you like to die?" she asked her.

Fenchurch surveyed her back and smiled. "You're from Earth," she said. There was a brief moment where no one said anything as the two women stared at each other. Finally the Kookaburra touched the man on the shoulder. "Get on with it," she said to him, and he moved off to another teller station, head swirling in colors.

The Kookaburra leapt gracefully over the counter and stepped next to Fenchurch. "May i?" she asked, gesturing at the screen at Fenchurch's teller station. Fenchurch stepped out of the way and the Kookaburra proceeded to hack into the computer and do things that were probably illegal. The two other bubble-headed people were doing similar things while the hoverbots slowly circled the lobby.

"You didn't answer my question," said the Kookaburra in a low voice to Fenchurch as she tapped at the screen.

"It was a stupid question," said Fenchurch.

"Not necessarily. Maybe you have a death wish."

"If i had a death wish, working as a teller and hoping to be shot by a bank robber doesn't seem to be a very practical way of carrying

that out.”

The Kookaburra said nothing, and continued tapping at the screen. Fenchurch saw some very large numbers flash by and guessed that this was a serious heist.

“I’m not from Earth, by the way,” said the Kookaburra, “but i’ve been there.”

A large red light started flashing on the screen and the Kookaburra started typing faster. Fenchurch noticed that all of the screens in the lobby now had a flashing red light on them. The Kookaburra finished her task with a flourish and turned to Fenchurch. “You’d better come with us,” she said, pointing at the screen. “You’re an accomplice.”

Fenchurch looked at her screen and saw that the access had been granted by her, even though she was quite sure that hadn’t allowed anyone else access at her station. The Kookaburra vaulted over the counter and set off across the lobby. After a few paces, she stopped and turned back to Fenchurch. “Coming?” she said, and Fenchurch wasn’t sure, but she thought that the woman almost smiled.

When you live most of your life on one planet where everyone knows that theirs is the only planet with intelligent life on it and then you spend some time travelling around the galaxy where there is quite a lot more intelligent life, both in volume and in scope, than you ever knew, you develop an attitude that your individual actions are maybe far less consequential than you thought them to be. And when you have an attitude like that, you’re much more prone to take opportunities which, in your previous cloistered single-planet mindset, you would probably never have considered. Fenchurch definitely had never considered gallivanting off with a group of interplanetary bank robbers, but today it seemed like a pretty good idea. She grabbed her travel bag, smiled apologetically at the other tellers, hurried nervously past them and the bank patrons (all of whom were getting tired of standing there with their hands up), and followed the Kookaburra out the door.

Chapter 16

The number one gentleman criminal in the history of the galaxy, according to the Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy, is Ababublab, the scourge of the Horsehead Nebula. In just one lifetime (although some criminal historians say that it was two, and others peg it as high as five), Ababublab managed to rack up somewhere between two and four million crimes, from simple theft at blaster-point to the hijacking of entire planets. In his later years, he became so famous that he wouldn't even have to leave his house to add to his crime total. People would show up at his doorstep (which was a considerable feat, as the doorstep of his mansion was the size of a small city bus) and demand to be robbed, which Ababublab, being the utmost gentleman, would graciously do.

He died under mysterious circumstances and left his heirs fabulous fortunes, all of which were stolen in the years after his death.

In a far distant but still respectable second place on the list of gentleman criminals was Zaphod Beeblebrox, who is currently listed as "whereabouts unknown - possibly retired."

In seventh place, and climbing fast, just behind Noogid Bolumbda of Gandracon 2 (whose penchant was stealing anything with wheels on it, cutting the wheels into squares, and replacing the vehicle before anyone noticed), is a shadowy figure known simply as "The Kookaburra."

Chapter 17

Ford and Arthur wandered slowly along the rows of merchants set up in Convention Hall Alpha 2 of Spacon 1. The sizes of all the merchandise on display ranged from tiny beeping things the size of a fingernail to hulking two-man battle robots which were quite a lot larger than two men. Arthur noticed that while they all varied in size, they all seemed to share the common trait of being made for the express purpose of killing something.

Ford wasn't all that interested in the various devices of death all around him and was giddily taking in all of the conventioneers.

"Look at them, Arthur!" he said, swivelling his head around to get a good look at a triped with a head where his left arm should be. "Nearly every intelligent species in the galaxy is represented here. Billions of years of evolution and there's still one little brain cell somewhere that says 'go hunt something.' Cool."

"I wouldn't mind hunting up a spot of tea," said Arthur, looking around to see if there was a food cart anywhere in the great hall.

"Now there's the difference between you and everyone else in here, Arthur. In all of *their* brains, there's something inside that says 'i must risk my life in the pursuit of the unattainable tmik-tmik because...' Well, i haven't any idea why, but in *your* brain, all there is is something that says 'i must find some tea.'"

"I like tea," said Arthur.

"Well, you're the only one."

"Plenty of people on Earth like tea!"

"*Liked.*"

"Well yes, but it *was* popular when there was an Earth, and i like to think that i'm carrying on Earthly traditions... It's a bit important i think."

"Important? Arthur, no offense, but you're a nothing person from a nonexistent planet in a nowhere part of the galaxy. Nobody else but you likes tea."

“Fenchurch likes tea,” said Arthur, a little petulantly. He started thinking about his quest to find Fenchurch and realized that he’d gotten off to a very bad start and really wasn’t making any headway at all, aside from being around Ford, who did seem to have a knack for finding people.

He assumed that this was some sort of Betelgeusian thing which Earth-people lacked, perhaps from drinking too much tea. He started thinking about how a trait like that would manifest itself. Would you just instinctively know where to go? Or would there be some strange cosmic force that pulled you in the right direction? Arthur was baffled. He’d always had trouble locating people at parties and that was usually in the space of two or three rooms. He couldn’t imagine finding someone in a whole galaxy. Not even on a planet. Probably not even in a city.

“Wait a tick,” Arthur thought, “*i did* locate someone in a city once, and it was Fenchurch! How did *i* do that?”

He thought about it for a bit and recalled that he was looking for something, but couldn’t remember what. He thought about it some more as he and Ford strolled through the crowds of people who were all eager to buy things from the rows of vendors who were eager to sell them things. All the eagerness in the hall made it hard to think.

“Ford,” said Arthur as they walked by a particularly eager salesman showing off some sort of twelve-pointed laser wristwatch, “do you think *i* should go hunting for this... whatever this thing is that all these people are hunting for?”

“Yes,” said Ford without thinking. “I mean, no,” he added after thinking for a couple of milliseconds. “Colossal waste of time. Might as well hunt inverse neutrinos with a plastic spoon.”

“Or Fenchurch,” sighed Arthur.

“Does Fenchurch have an inverse neutrino trap?”

“No, *i* meant search for Fenchurch. It’s what *i*’ve been trying to do, you know.”

“With a plastic spoon?”

“No, not with a— oh, never mind. It just all seems so hopeless at the moment.”

“Nothing’s hopeless Arthur. Even if it’s absolutely mathematically one hundred percent impossible to do whatever it is you’re trying to do, you can still, in your particular Earthish way, hope. Therefore, it’s not hopeless.”

Arthur smiled at this thought.

“Won’t work worth a scrap, but you can still hope,” said Ford, darting off to the side to look at a very expensive tmik-tmik trap. Ford had absolutely no interest in tmik-tmik hunting, but since this particular device was so fabulously expensive, he had the urge to find out if buying the most expensive tmik-tmik hunting device in the galaxy would angry the accounting department at the Guide and by exactly how much.

Arthur continued down the row of vendors until he came to a large mural set up in a great circle in the middle of the hall. All of the panels of the mural depicted lots of people and animals and strange aliens all engaging in various odd activities. After looking at it for a while, Arthur concluded that it was depicting all the various ways throughout history that people have been trying to hunt and kill things other than for food—there was a lot of depictions of people mounting heads to walls. Arthur walked slowly along the mural, picking out the animals that he recognized while half-thinking about his own personal hunt for Fenchurch and hoping that it wouldn’t end with her head mounted to a wall. He stopped when he got to a panel where there was an odd mammalish/birdish animal drawn with a glowing aura around it and hovering over some people who looked to all be blind.

“Oh, it’s one of those.” said Arthur aloud.

“Yes,” said a man who was standing next to him gazing upward at the mural, “one of those... inspiring, isn’t it?”

“Er, i suppose,” said Arthur, “although they’ve not got the detail quite right under the wing there. They’ve drawn it as feathers, it’s more of a fur, really.”

“You’re an expert, then?” asked the man as a few passers-by stopped to listen.

“Oh no,” said Arthur, “it’s just that the ones i’ve seen—”

"You've seen one?" said a squat woman nearby, elbowing her way past a couple more onlookers.

"Oh, yes," said Arthur. "Quite a few of them."

"You've seen *more* than *one*!?" said the man next to Arthur with a look of incredulity on his face.

"Er, yes..." said Arthur. He looked around and noticed that there was now a small crowd surrounding him, some murmuring to each other. Arthur wasn't quite sure what was going on, but soldiered on, as there seemed to be an awkward silence building up.

"I was stranded on this planet, you see—"

"What planet?"

"Well, i don't know exactly..."

"What sector was it in?"

"I don't know that either."

"He's lying," said the squat woman, loudly.

"No, i'm not," insisted Arthur, pointing at the mural. "If this drawing is accurate, or accurate enough anyway, i'm quite sure that's what i saw."

There was a tense silence as all of the onlookers stared at Arthur and he nervously glanced around at all of them. He wasn't sure what to say next but was relieved of that responsibility by a commotion at the edge of the crowd. Whispers of "Mr. Mingnut" started bouncing around the crowd as a large man waded his way toward Arthur. To say this man was broad-shouldered was an understatement—he looked like what you'd get if you took half a king-sized mattress and attached arms, legs, and a head onto it. He waddled up to Arthur and paused, sizing him up, then he extended a burly arm, far off to Arthur's left.

"Mr. Mingnut," he said, in a booming gravelly voice.

"Arthur Dent," said Arthur, reaching over to shake the man's hand.

Mr. Mingnut held Arthur's hand for just longer than was comfortable and seemed to be deciding whether or not he felt like crushing it. He finally let go and rolled his head around to look up at the mural, then rolled it back down to look at Arthur.

"You've seen one, then?" he asked.

"Yes, several."

"Several..." said Mr. Mingnut slowly, digesting this information. "And you don't know where?"

"No, sorry," said Arthur with a small smile and an even smaller shrug.

"No matter," said Mr. Mingnut. "As you know, i am *the* expert, and the only man to have nearly captured one, so i must give you a test to verify the accuracy of your claim."

"Oh," said Arthur, still wondering what all the fuss was about. There was a tense silence as the crowd pressed in, all eyes on Mr. Mingnut.

"How does it fly?" he asked in a grave tone.

"Er, well, i don't exactly know," said Arthur. "It's wings don't seem big enough to keep it up." At this there was a rising rumble of disapproval from the crowd, which was immediately silenced by the sudden raising of one of Mr. Mingnut's club-like arms.

"That is the correct answer," said Mr. Mingnut to the now silent crowd. He looked back at Arthur with a penetrating stare.

"What does it eat?" he asked in a tone even graver and more serious than before.

"Er, i don't know that either," said Arthur, hoping that perhaps not knowing might be the wrong answer again. The crowd erupted in another flurry of grumblings and comments about Arthur's claim until Mr. Mingnut's hand shot up again, restoring silence.

"That, too, is the correct answer," intoned Mr. Mingnut. He stared unblinkingly into Arthur's eyes and, in a tone that would've made the most serious newscaster reporting on the most serious crime to humanity ever wet his pants with envy, he asked "What is its favorite color?"

"What?" said Arthur, rather surprised by the question.

"What is its favorite color?" boomed Mr. Mingnut again, causing a local newscaster in the next hall to wet his pants.

"Well that's a silly question," said Arthur. "How would i know that?"

The awed and curious silence surrounding Arthur changed abruptly to a shocked and amazed silence. No one had ever spoken so

irreverently to Mr. Mingnut before. Arthur of course didn't know this, so continued on.

"Why don't you ask me something tangible? Like what color the underside of its tail feathers are, or what the shape of its teeth are, or what it tastes like—" At this there was widespread chuckling throughout the crowd and some outright laughter.

"And i suppose you'd have answers for questions like that?" said Mr. Mingnut with a gravelly chuckle.

"I suppose that i would!" said Arthur, becoming annoyed at the entire situation. "Why is this... this flidge thing so important anyway? Are they endangered?"

There was a roar of laughter from the crowd. Mr Mingnut didn't laugh though, and there was a curious expression on his face.

"I'm sorry, what did you call it?"

"Oh, a flidge. Rather a silly name i guess, but i didn't know its proper name and i felt that i ought to call it *something*."

The uncomfortable silence gradually returned as Mr. Mingnut looked slowly from Arthur to the mural and back again.

"You don't know what that is?" asked Mr. Mingnut in a tone that couldn't possibly be even graver and more serious than any he'd used up to this point, but was. Arthur shook his head.

"That," said Mr. Mingnut, pointing at the golden-glowed flying bird/mammal thing with entirely too much reverence, "is a tmik-tmik."

"Oh," said Arthur, happy to finally learn what all the fuss was about. "Well, i can see why you're all keen on hunting them then, they're quite tasty."

If the silence that preceded that statement could be characterized as "complete and total hear-the-blood-flowing-through-your-skull silence" then the silence that followed that statement made the previous silence sound like the squeal markets of Flagroon City on National Screaming Day.

Coincidentally, the clamor of noise that followed that silence made the squeal markets of Flagroon City on National Screaming Day sound like somebody blinking loudly.

Chapter 18

The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy is not known for its consistency, unless of course you're talking about change, in which case the Guide is extremely consistent, in that it is consistently changing, sometimes right in the middle of don't want to brush your teeth in a Sanflubian airport terminal.

But subspatial atmospheric travel aside, the vast majority of users of the Guide use it to find information which pertains to now, and now is rather fluid, unlike, say, then, or as it is sometimes called, history. History is generally a chronologically ordered pile of facts, and the editors at the Guide, as well as not caring very much at all about history, take a certain slack attitude toward facts quite a lot of the time.

"The fact is," said an unnamed Guide editor, "if a person reads in the Guide that you can get a good lunch in the Azure district of Flibibit Prime, that's more important than knowing that the cultural history of Flibibit Prime consists mostly of inter-tribal hot sauce challenges and cannibalism."

If one were to look for an example of change in the Guide, one would only have to look to just a couple of variations of silence before now, when the Guide listed Doot Mingnut as the only person to have nearly captured a tmik-tmik. If one were to look *now*, there would be no mention of Doot Mingnut, since the Guide would only list Arthur Dent as the only person to have ever captured a tmik-tmik. Arthur Dent was also listed as the only person to have ever killed a tmik-tmik, and the only person to have ever eaten a tmik-tmik.

Sometimes change can be scary.

Chapter 19

“Change,” said Fonk, looking out at the small cluster of reporters gathered in front of him, “is not static.” He paused to let that sink in, which it didn’t, and probably wouldn’t for a while, but Fonk had his reasons for saying it. One reason was that it sounded important. Another reason was that he liked to state obvious facts in an overly important manner just to watch people argue about the meaning of his statement for the next few years. There were probably more reasons too, but his dramatic pause had become a bit long as he stood there thinking of all the ways he liked his first sentence, so he figured that he’d better get on with it. He waited a little more just to make the silence completely awkward, then continued.

“The changes at the Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy have been completed. The Guide headquarters is firmly anchored at its undisclosed secure location, the gift shop has extended its hours to better reflect the local workday customs, and i shall be departing on sabbatical at the end of this press conference.”

He looked out at the video cameras and small armada of reporters in front of him and wondered what else he could say that might sound important. Sub-theta neutrino fission anomalies came to mind, but then left again. “Questions?” he asked.

“Is there a lunch provided?” asked one reporter.

“No,” said Fonk.

There was a wave of muttering and half of the reporters shuffled out of the room.

“How about snacks?” asked one of the remaining reporters.

“No,” said Fonk again.

The room cleared out, leaving a reporter from Andromeda Daily Bitbeat, a junior reporter from Teen Cyclops Magazine, and a bored camera operator who was contractually obligated to cover the entire press conference. Seeing his opportunity to ask an actual question at an actual press conference now that all of the seasoned reporters had

left, the rookie reporter didn't hesitate.

"Where can i go to buy shoes when my feet are two different sizes?" he asked, nearly vomiting from excitement.

Fonk looked down at the nervously twitching reporter. "Have you ever even *looked* at the Guide?" he asked. The reporter dropped his head in shame, choked back his excitement vomit, and slunk out of the room, leaving the camera man, who was now asleep, and one lone reporter who was watching the scene while chewing on a bit of barbed wire.

"Who'll be running the Guide in your absence?" he asked Fonk, tilting his head to look casually interested but not *too* interested. Fonk looked back at him with a sudden desire to magically conjure up a large heavy object which could be handily dropped on the reporter's head.

"Ah, a good question," said Fonk, resisting the heavy object-dropping impulse. "The original plan was to let the Guide run by itself, but apparently a lot of things don't get done in a state like that, so an interim director has been appointed."

"Yeah?" said the reporter, tipping his head a little more and making Fonk wish that the ceiling would collapse. "So who is this guy? Bigwig industrialist? Lauded academic? Deadly sous chef?"

"None of those, i'm afraid," said Fonk. "Just a normal man who i think is exactly the right person for this situation. At this point in the Guide's history, we need stability, a resistance to bold crazy new ideas, and, dare i say it, a certain polished mediocrity. This man will bring to the Guide all of that and a sense of the average person that the Guide has based its reputation on."

"And so, in approximately half a tick, all daily operations of the Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy will be turned over in entirety to its new Super-Duper Sub-par Executive in Charge of All Things at the Guide, Arthur Dent."

Chapter 20

Ford happened to have a keen sense of being. That is, he was keen on being wherever something was happening—preferably something that stimulated all seven senses. At least four of those senses were at the moment sending signals to Ford’s brain informing him in no uncertain terms that he’d have more fun being in the center of the great convention hall, which was where he was now headed, than being at the booth where two friendly salesmen were demonstrating the One Man Mobile Tmik-Tmik Location and Extraction Fully Automated Exoskeleton Hunting Apparatus, one of which he’d had the good sense to take along with him as it made stomping through the crows much easier.

Arthur had a keen sense of terror, although terror is not one of those feelings that one necessarily has to have a keen sense of. A very broad and general sense of terror is enough to suffice in nearly all terrifying situations. Nevertheless, most of Arthur’s meagerly unrepresented senses were informing him quite insistently that he ought to be very much in a state of terror.

The silence that had preceded the silenter silence, which was a prelude to a clamor, had now given way to a full-on roar. It wasn’t the roar that was inducing the feelings of terror in Arthur, but the people responsible for the roar, who were pushing and clawing their way towards Arthur. Mr. Mingnut had Arthur in nearly a choke-hold and was swinging him about yelling “Back! Back, cretins! He’s mine!” This was a statement that Arthur felt he should protest since he certainly did not belong to Mr. Mingnut but he refrained from offering a dissenting opinion because he was A) in a choke hold, and B) terrified.

Even with all of the screaming and clawing and clamoring and choking, Arthur thought that he heard a steady “boom, boom, boom” getting closer and louder. In what seemed like no time at all (probably due to the lack of oxygen in Arthur’s brain), a large robot flung the last clump of manic people out of its way and stepped in front of Mr.

Mingnut (who's color was growing paler by the second) and Arthur (who's color was coming back now that he wasn't being so severely choked).

"ARTHUR!" said the robot in a loud, deep, but oddly familiar voice.

"he's mine!" said Mr. Mingnut in an altogether meeker voice than he'd intended.

"Piss off," said the robot. It reached out a massive forearm and flicked Mr. Mingnut over the subdued crowd behind Arthur. The crowd took a couple steps back, leaving Arthur alone and looking at the large and very threatening machine in front of him.

"RIGHT ARTHUR," boomed the robot "LET'S GO!"

"Er, go?"

The robot made what looked very much like an exasperated sigh, picked up Arthur by the back of his shirt, and stomped off toward the entrance of the convention hall.

Chapter 21

Blagomelt Krork flicked through the news wires on the screen in front of him and sighed. Ever since people stopped time-travelling the news business had become horrendously boring. Nobody inadvertently killing their own ancestors. Nobody stopping a bloody war only to accidentally start five new ones. Nobody doing *anything*. He sighed again and kept flipping, stopping eventually on a report of someone claiming to have killed a tmik-tmik. “Well, there’s no explosions,” he thought to himself, “but that’ll have to be the top story on Tock Top News.”

He flicked through some more stories. Comet just missing a planet... press conference from the Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy... hourly news brief of errors and omissions from the Encyclopedia Galactica... report of a kidnapping on Spacon 1... He paused and frowned.

A light on Blagomelt’s desk blinked and he tapped it. “Yes?” he said into the intercom, still pondering over the news feed.

“Mr. Krork?” came his secretary’s voice, “Trillian Astra on the line for you.”

Blagomelt tore his attention away from the news feeds and tapped another button. Trillian’s face came up on the screen. “Trillian!” he said, forcing a smile.

“Hi Blaggie. I want my old job back.”

The smile on Blagomelt’s face faltered a bit. He hated being called Blaggie and he’d most likely fire anyone who dared to call him that, but Trillian always seemed to get away with it.

“Just like that?” he said. “No ‘how are you?, What’s happening? How’s the number one news business in the galaxy doing?’”

“Yeah, fine, all of that,” said Trillian. “I want my old job back. Od’s become boring and not here.”

“Od?”

“You knew him as Zaphod. But he’s just not as much fun with-

out his other head.”

“Yeah, i’ve heard that headectomies can do that to a person.”

“So have you got an assignment for me?”

Blagomelt flicked back through the news stories. “Well, there’s a bulletin about someone finally killing a tmik-tmik.”

“Human interest,” scoffed Trillian. “I want hard news.”

“Hang on, there’s also an announcement about the new director of the Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy.”

“That’s bottom of the tock stuff Blaggie.”

“Then there’s a report of a kidnapping on Spacon 1.”

“High profile target?”

“Well, here’s the thing. It looks like some unevolved plebe from a backwater planet in the Western Spiral Arm.”

“So who would care? I want a real story, Blag.”

“It’s the same guy.”

“The same guy as what?”

“All three of those stories. Same person. Someone named Arthur Dent.”

“Arthur?”

“Dent, yeah. Ever heard of him?”

“He hit on me at a party once.”

“Great! Good party?”

“I left with Zaphod Beeblebrox.”

“So that would be yes...” Blagomelt thought about it for a second. “Or no... whatever, we’re going to lead with the tmik-tmik story, but we’ll promo an exclusive if you can get it, Trillian. Can you?”

“I’ve got some sources...”

“Great. Anything else we should know about this Dent guy?”

“Tall, handsome in a simple sort of way. Likes tea.”

“Tea?”

“Yeah. He’s from Earth.”

“Isn’t that the planet the Vogons blew up claiming that they were building an interstellar bypass?”

“That’s the one.”

“Aren’t you from Earth?”

“I was, yes.”

“Well then you two are practically cousins!”

“No, not related. Except... oh yeah...”

“What?”

“Arthur Dent’s the father of my child.”

Blagomelt smiled a genuine smile this time. His day had just gotten a lot weirder and therefore, a lot better.

Chapter 22

Zarniwoop came crashing into the Machina X and mashed the door controls with his fist.

“Power up!” he yelled. “Spacon 1! Plot it!”

Lucifer had been running through various subroutines, all of which involved the painful death of someone. He briefly plugged Zarniwoop into the formula before responding as slowly as possible. “Where would you like to go?”

“Spacon 1!” yelled Zarniwoop. “Now now now now now!”

“Ah. I see.” said Lucifer, slowing his cadence down even more out of spite. “You feel the need to fraternize with overweight ill-dressed semi-sentient conventioneers, do you?”

“I feel the need to kill someone on Spacon 1 and if we’re not out of this space dock in half a tick i may decide that i feel the need to kill someone or something on this ship!”

“Point taken,” said Lucifer after a just annoyingly long enough pause. The fact that Zarniwoop was planning on killing someone made Lucifer slightly more willing to help. He fired up the engines and began the undocking procedure from the great spaceport at Wood Tick Nebula Three.

“Who exactly are you intending to kill?” asked Lucifer, once they were clear of the spaceport and Zarniwoop had calmed down enough to sit, nervously fidgeting in a chair.

“The man who has my job,” said Zarniwoop. “The man who is not going to have my job much longer because it’s my job and not his and i’m going to *take* it from him *and* kill him and then my job will be *mine* again!

“I see,” said Lucifer, not really caring. “And this man would be...?”

“Don’t you watch the news?” snapped Zarniwoop. “The new head of the Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy! Arthur Dent!”

“Oh. Him.”

“Yes... *him*,” said Zarniwoop, mustering all of the malevolence he could for someone he’d never met.

“He stole this ship, you know.”

Zarniwoop fell out of his chair. “Arthur Dent was on *this* ship?”

“Oh yes,” said Lucifer, ratcheting up the indifference level. “Stole it, just like you. I believe we dropped him off in the parking lot of the Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy. Gave me some helpful advice just before he left. Turned out not to work though... Yes, i think we should kill him.”

Lucifer turned the Machina X toward Spacon 1 and fired all engines.

Chapter 23

Fenchurch sat in the sleek black lounge of the sleek black spaceship. The mysterious Kookaburra had disappeared into a private cabin as soon as they'd all boarded. Her two accomplices flipped off their camouflage bubbleheads and tended to stowing the hoverbots as the ship piloted itself out of the atmosphere and off into space.

The man that Fenchurch had been talking to in the bank was named Sputty. He had shoulder-length blonde hair and a deep tan and looked very much like he ought to be in a surfing movie. The other accomplice was a woman named Libby who didn't talk nearly as much as Sputty, who liked to do nothing but. He was currently going on about how stark the interior of the spaceship was and that it needed some driftwood accents or a koi pond. Fenchurch took in her new surroundings while waiting for a break in Sputty's monologue.

"So you're really all from Australia then?" she asked when Sputty paused to breathe. "From Earth?"

"Oh yeah," said Sputty. "Libbs is from Broken Hill, but i met 'er in Adelaide. I came from a spot on the map called Rumbalara where there ain't nothin' but nothin'!"

"So how did you—"

"End up robbin' banks in space? Good story. We used to rob places on Earth. Not banks, mind you, just little stuff—gas stations, bingo halls, that sorta stuff. Well, we just done a job in Yulara and was runnin' west when outta the sky comes this spaceship that just sets down neat as you please right in the middle of the road."

"So there it sits, as big as, blocking our way, and of course we've got coppers on our back, so we'd best get along but can't get around the spaceship. Well, these little guys get out and we just run right up to 'em, not caring a bit that they're, y'know, aliens, and right quick we strike a deal and they give us a lift."

"So off we go and we figure, well, let's look around the galaxy a bit 'fore we get back and it's a pretty awesome place, eh? So we just fig-

ger we'll stay. 'Course then the earth got blown up so we didn't have much choice after that, did we?"

"And now you're intergalactic bank robbers," said Fenchurch.

"Well, that was the Kookaburra's doin'. We were kinda disorganized 'til she came along. Set us straight, she did."

"But she said she's not from Earth. How did she get a name like the Kookaburra?"

"Libbs gave her that. Here we were, driftin' around the galaxy, and one day, she shows up"—Sputty nodded at the closed cabin door—"and says she can help us but doesn't tell us her name, so we ask her what we should call her and she says 'you pick,' and right then and there, Libby says 'Kookaburra' and this woman smiles a bit and says 'OK' and that was that. We got used to it quick, and besides, no one in the galaxy ever heard of a kookaburra before, so it's got a bit of mystery to it, don't it?"

"She is a bit of a mystery," agreed Fenchurch.

"That she's got in spades," said Sputty, looking around the lounge. "Can't say i agree with her taste in decorating though..."

Sputty started to go on about the decor again but was cut short by the cabin door sliding open and the Kookaburra striding out. She looked around at her crew, then settled her gaze on Fenchurch.

"Comfortable?" she asked.

"Yes, i guess so," said Fenchurch. "We were just, er, discussing the decor."

"It's black," said the Kookaburra. "Sputty hates it."

"Now i didn't say—"

"We're changing course," said the Kookaburra, ignoring Sputty's protest.

"Coppers?" asked Libby.

"No," said the Kookaburra, tapping a switch on the wall. A screen flicked to life and a news broadcast started playing. It was about some famous person who was kidnapped, someone who had something to do with the Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy.

"Spacon 1," said the Kookaburra. "Set the course."

Libby headed for the bridge while Sputty and Fenchurch watched

the news broadcast. "Another bank job, boss?" asked Sputty.

"Kidnapping," said the Kookaburra, gazing thoughtfully at the news report.

"So wait," said Sputty, thinking hard, "are we kidnapping the chap who just got kidnapped?"

"Yeah," said the Kookaburra. She watched the report for a few seconds, then turned back to her cabin.

Fenchurch had been watching the report with interest and suddenly realized what had seemed so familiar about the blurry footage of the kidnapping. "I think i know that man!" she said.

The Kookaburra stopped at her cabin door and looked at Fenchurch, then up at the screen again. A picture of a frantic Arthur Dent that appeared to have been taken from some stairwell security camera was now on the screen with his name in large letters below it.

"Yes!" said Fenchurch in surprise. "Arthur Dent! He's the one who rescued me from earth! I had no idea he was so famous!"

The news report ended and Fenchurch looked back at the Kookaburra, who gave her an odd smile, then disappeared back into her cabin.

"So you know this chap, then, eh?" said Sputty. "Where's he from?"

"England," said Fenchurch with a little sigh.

"England, eh? On Earth? Never been there. Like the Queen, though."

"Yes, everybody does."

"Course there ain't no Queen to like anymore, now is there?" There was a moment of silence as the occupants of the sleek black spaceship thought about their nonexistent home.

"Still, funny, ain't it?" said Sputty.

"What's funny?" asked Fenchurch.

"Well, how all of us here and yer mate Arthur, we're all from Earth."

"That is odd," said Fenchurch, "but the whole galaxy is odd, so maybe it's not odd at all."

"Pr'aps," said Sputty, scratching his ear, "but it sorta makes ya wonder how we all got here."

Chapter 24

Arthur was uncomfortable and hot and was in fact wondering at that very moment how he'd managed to get where he happened to be. He was uncomfortable because he was being carried by a large robot. He was hot because the large robot was firing lots of laser cannons at everything, blowing things up, and generally clearing a path by means of large amounts of destruction and explosions. And he was wondering about it all because he was Arthur.

The robot lumbered out of the convention hall (after blowing up the doors) and into an atrium. It stopped and looked around.

"WELL, ARTHUR?" it boomed in its mechanical voice, "WHERE TO?"

"Oh, is it my choice?" said Arthur with a note of surprise. "Well, then, I rather think that I'd prefer to be put down, thank you." Arthur felt that it was right to be polite to a large object sporting innumerable weapons, and especially so to one that seemed so keen on using them.

"OH, SORRY," boomed the robot, "HANG ON..." There were a couple of clicks and a small panel flipped up just below the neck of the robot, and the head of Ford Prefect popped out. "Hi Arthur! It's me!"

"Ford!" said Arthur, surprised, but then, as he thought about it for a couple seconds, not surprised at all. "What are you doing in there?"

"I'm rescuing you!" said Ford happily. "Boy, that sounds like a line from a movie... something with swords and lasers... a guy with a cool helmet..."

"Er, Ford," said Arthur, nodding in the direction they'd come from. People were starting to emerge from where they'd ducked for cover.

"Right. Well, we've got the knitters, the settlers, or the wackos." Arthur looked around and saw that the atrium that they were in led to convention halls in all four directions. To the right was a sign that said "Welcome Flag Knitters of Oopsluin Gamma." To the left was a ban-

ner that read “People for the Exploration and Settlement of the Boodlibase Nebula.” And straight ahead was a placard that read “Employee and Stockholders Convention, Wacko Conglomerated Industrial Food Manufacturing Corporation.”

“I’d say go with the food,” said Arthur, realizing that he was hungry.

“Good choice, old frood!” said Ford, and they lurched forward.

“And Ford,” yelled Arthur over the clunking of the robotic exoskeleton, “i think we don’t need to be blowing up doors, do we?”

“Oh, but it’s so much fun!” said Ford, then after a pause yelled out “Spacecapades!”

“What?”

“That’s the name of the movie. Just thought of it.”

Ford turned the robot around and sent a volley of laser fire at the entrance to the tmik-tmik hunters convention hall, then, before the dust cleared, blasted the entire facade off of the knitters convention hall. With that, he turned and quickly and quietly tiptoed (as quietly as a hulking mechanical robotic hunting and demolishing exoskeleton can tiptoe) through the doors into the Wacko convention hall.

Chapter 25

Spacecapades is one of the most popular science fiction shows in the galaxy and is referred to in some sectors as “the only show that matters.” These sectors are not generally frequented by tourists and have no professional sports teams.

Spacecapades originally aired only on the Moolius subcontinent of Altair 3 and was cancelled by the network in the middle of its third episode, just when Captain T and his crew were about to land on the planet of slippery chairs. Because of this, fans of the show (who call themselves Spacecapadets (or Spacecapadettes)), commonly refuse to sit in any chair that has even a moderately high gloss and are fond of saying “sit not, slip not!” to the annoyance of anyone around them.

After the original show was cancelled, fans demanded that it be uncancelled, which it wasn’t. But soon afterward, the show was rebooted with a new younger cast. This reboot was also cancelled.

Following that, there were two animated series, an “origins” series, several stage plays, a poetry slam version, and a reality show documenting the making of a new series which was cancelled before it even aired. The reality show was also cancelled.

The first wide-format *Spacecapades* movie was made for 189 Altarian dollars and was filmed entirely with finger puppets. It was such a huge success at the *Spacecapades* conventions that Omnidigalax Pictures bought the rights for 45 billion Altarian dollars, cast actual actors, changed the plot, and released it at *Spacecapades: The Spacecapades Movie*. It did modestly well, but most true fans dismiss this iteration of *Spacecapades* as non-canonical and generally agree that *Spacecapades: First Basic* is the beginning of the “new era” of the franchise.

The producers of *Spacecapades: First Basic* took the bold step of casting Captain T as a man old enough to actually be a space captain, as all the previous versions had been making him younger and younger to the point where it strained credulity to have a captain have to ask

his mother if he could fly to another planet.

The subsequent movies were phenomenally successful and spawned more plays, musicals, comet surfing entertainment spectacles, spoken-word albums, spin-off movies, and pretty much anything else in any sort of broadcast form.

With the gargantuan success of the *Spacecapades* franchise, the *Spacecapades* convention (*Spacecapadecon*), which was held every fourth passing of the moon of Altair 6 through the Glucknoodle Belt, to be too big for its preferred convention hall, the Mongo Hall on the planet Malbick (named after Malefron Ploekas Mongo, the first Malbickian to die from poor hygiene). The governing council of Malbick decided to build a new, larger convention center and park it in orbit around Malbick. This strategy wasn't quite as well thought through as it probably should have been, though. As more and more conventions were booked on the Spacon 1 satellite, more and more convention halls and hotel rooms were built on the satellite, using more and more of the natural and industrial resources of the planet Malbick. Eventually all of the ores and minerals were mined out of Malbick, Spacon 1 overtook Malbick in size, and the remaining bits of Malbick were used to mulch the thousands of planter boxes in the lobbies and atriums of Spacon 1.

Chapter 26

Arthur and Ford crouched behind a large planter box somewhere on Spacon 1. Arthur, as was his custom, had absolutely no idea where he was. Ford had a vague idea, which was good enough for Ford.

They had been ducking randomly through a seemingly endless string of convention halls (after selling the robotic exoskeleton to a Wacko middle management type who saw this as his chance to get ahead in the company) and had stopped in this particular atrium behind this particular planter because Arthur was particular about not dying of a heart attack and needed to catch his breath.

"Ford," said Arthur between gulps of air, "I would think... that if anyone... were—"

"Made of helium?" guessed Ford.

"What?"

"Scared of lily pads?" he guessed again.

"No!" said Arthur, still breathing hard. "If anyone... were trying..."

"To split themselves in two? Eat a zeppelin? Hover indefinitely? What?"

"I'm trying... to tell you!"

"Well you're not doing very well. You keep starting, but you never get anywhere."

"I'm trying!" exploded Arthur

"Very trying," agreed Ford.

Arthur glared at Ford for a moment, which made Ford not say anything just long enough for Arthur to finally catch his breath.

"All I was saying, Ford, is that if anyone were chasing us, they'd most likely be even more lost than we are."

"We're not lost, Arthur," said Ford brightly. "We can't be!"

"We can't?"

"Nope."

"Then where are we?"

“We’re here,” said Ford, looking around and then pointing directly at the floor.

“Ah,” said Arthur, nodding his head. “And where is here?”

“It’s where we are.”

“You said that, but it’s not helping.”

“Look, Arthur, you can’t get lost on Spacon 1. It’s the only habitable sphere in the galaxy with perpetual room service everywhere. And I do mean *everywhere*.” He spun around and jabbed a button on the wall behind them. A cheery voice said “room service!”

Ford smiled, then led Arthur furtively out of the atrium to a connecting hallway as the voice said “room service!” cheerily again. They moved down the hallway and Arthur could hear the voice repeating the words “room service!” a few more times and detected that the cheeriness was waning rapidly.

Chapter 27

Fenchurch sat in the pilot's chair of the sleek black spaceship watching the stars go by. Every once in a while there'd be a soft beep or a low buzz as the ship piloted itself through the cosmos, but otherwise it was very still and calm. The initial excitement that Fenchurch had felt when she took off with these space criminals was starting to wear off. The Kookaburra was still holed up in her quarters, Libby had gone below to do some maintenance, and Sputty had talked himself to sleep at the mess table. So Fenchurch had explored the ship and ended up on the bridge watching stars.

After a while, she heard soft footsteps behind her and she turned to see the Kookaburra stepping into the cabin.

"Pretty, isn't it?" said the Kookaburra as she leaned over a console and tapped a few buttons. After a few seconds she looked back up at Fenchurch through her veil of greenish black hair. "About half way there."

"Oh," said Fenchurch. "Good, i guess. Where are we going exactly?"

"Spacon 1. Largest conventionsphere in the galaxy." The kookaburra sat down in a chair and started idly swivelling it back and forth. Fenchurch got the impression that this woman was even younger than she first thought, maybe just out of her teens. She studied her for a bit.

"You look very familiar to me," said Fenchurch. "Do you suppose we met once when you visited Earth?" Even as she said it, she realized how ridiculous that idea was and she decided that she'd gotten so used to seeing non-Earth creatures that anyone who looked like an Earthling (which the Kookaburra very much did) had a certain air of familiarity about them. The Kookaburra looked at Fenchurch with an amused expression, but didn't answer.

"Were you ever in London?" tried Fenchurch again, just trying to get some sort of conversation going and not knowing what else to talk about.

"I was," said the Kookaburra, "but not in your London. Different one."

“London, England, i mean.”

“Yes, that one, but not *your* London, England.”

“There’s more than one?”

“Depends which reality you’re in,” said the Kookaburra. She swiveled her chair all the way around and looked out at the stars.

“Oh,” said Fenchurch. She wanted to ask more but had a feeling that that was about as much information as this mysterious woman was willing to give. They both sat and watched the stars.

“Can i ask you something?” said Fenchurch after a while. The Kookaburra swiveled back to look at her.

“Why do you rob banks?”

The Kookaburra relaxed a bit and smiled. “I don’t,” she said.

“But didn’t you just...?”

The Kookaburra shook her head. “I just move things around.”

“Move things?”

“Money, credit, stocks, securities, power... There’s some very rich people who’ll find out that they don’t have any credit today. And there’s some people who’re just getting by who’ll find out that they have quite a bit more to get by on now.”

“So you’re not taking any money at all?”

The Kookaburra shook her head again.

“So you’re like a modern-day Robin Hood!”

“A what?”

“Robin Hood. A character from English folklore. Stole from the rich and gave to the poor.”

“Hm... Yeah, something like that i suppose. Catchy.”

“Except Robin Hood always dressed in green.”

“Ew!” said the Kookaburra, making a face. Fenchurch thought to herself that this woman couldn’t be much older than twenty.

“And he robbed carriages.”

“Shoulda gone with banks. Much easier.”

“Is it really that easy to rob a bank? In all the stories i’ve heard of, the criminals don’t usually get away with much. Plus they’re usually caught. And they’re usually stupid.”

“Well, as i’ve never actually *robbed* a bank, i couldn’t tell you, but

it is pretty easy to break into their systems.”

“I was wondering about that. The system i worked on seemed very secure.”

“Oh, it is. It’s *very* secure. In fact, i’ll bet that you had to change your login password every day, right?”

“Several times a day actually. Seemed rather silly.”

“Yeah,” said the Kookaburra, leaning forward in her chair. “The thing is, everybody’s so worried about security that it’s become this huge over-inflated *thing*. If this spaceship were the size of the security software at your bank, the actual banking software—the stuff that does *everything* else that a bank does—would be the size of my fist.”

Fenchurch looked at the Kookaburra’s fist in front of her face and tried to imagine it as a piece of software. It didn’t seem very soft.

“So how do you get in then?”

The Kookaburra shrugged. “I set the time to zero.”

Fenchurch looked at her, not quite understanding. “That’s it?”

“The security software stores every password you’ve ever used and won’t let you use the same one twice, right?”

“Yes.”

“So if the time is zero and the software looks before zero for all of the passwords you’ve used, what does it find?”

“Umm... negative one?”

“That or nothing. In any case, since there’s nothing to check against, you can type in whatever you want and this”—she shook her fist—“becomes this.” She opened her fist and wiggled her fingers.

“You’d think the security people would have thought of that.”

“Oh, they have, but no one wants to fund a project to protect against a situation that can’t possibly occur.”

Fenchurch thought about it for a moment. “So where’s the challenge?”

“Challenge?”

“Yeah. What makes this something interesting? Why do you do it?”

The Kookaburra looked at Fenchurch for a few seconds, deciding what to say. “It’s the right thing to do. And it’s fun. And it’s something

that i fit into very well.” She swiveled her chair around to look at one of the view screens. “This,” she said, tapping the glowing dot on the screen labeled “Spacon 1.” “This is the challenge.”

Chapter 28

Mr. Mingnut stood squarely (which is the only way he *could* stand, considering his girth) at a large window overlooking the convention hall. He watched as an array of repair bots zipped around cleaning up the debris from the departing destructor robot. Some of them were trying to remove people from where they'd been strewn about and the people in question were arguing loudly that they weren't debris but actual living beings and should not be cleaned up and discarded with the rest of the rubble. The repair bots were having none of it. They were not the sort of robots that you could successfully (or even at all) argue with and the loudly complaining people were all being dumped in sanitation carts from which they'd extricate themselves and limp off in a huff.

Mr. Mingnut surveyed the scene and scratched his eyebrow. "This," he said to the dog sitting next to him, "will be my greatest challenge."

"Cleaning up the convention hall, or regaining your reputation?" asked the dog.

"Neither," said Mr. Mingnut, looking down at the dog, who looked back up at him and cocked its head sideways. The dog was medium-sized with a short brown and tan coat of fur. His short floppy ears hung down but could stick straight up if the dog wanted them to. At the moment he didn't want them to. You could imagine this dog in a front yard, running circles around a happy family of kids, chasing sticks, rolling in the grass—it was that kind of dog.

But of course, it wasn't a dog at all. It was a Tecoseerian from the planet Tecoseera where the dominant intelligent species looked, to an Earthling, like a dog but looked, to another Tecoseerian, like just another normal person. A furry quadruped person as opposed to a semi-hairless biped person, but a person nonetheless. This particular Tecoseerian was named Rutlow, was an excellent hunter, and thought that Earthlings looked like aliens.

“Or perhaps both,” said Mr. Mingnut. “But i shant be cleaning the convention hall so perhaps i should just say one. The reputation one.”

“I gathered that.”

“Yes, i shall go on a hunt. I shall hunt this Arthur Dent. I shall capture him. I shall force from him the magic that he surely must possess—the magic that has allowed him to slay the honored tmik-tmik when no one else is able. Then this Arthur Dent will, i don’t know... fall into a star or something. I haven’t worked that part out yet. But then... then *i* will once again be the most famous tmik-tmik hunter in all the galaxy!

He looked down at Rutlow, who was disinterestedly licking his forepaws. Rutlow looked up. “Oh, have you finished?”

“I have,” intoned Mr. Mingnut in a tone that was far too grave for the situation.

“Oh. Off to hunt then, yes?”

“Yes.”

The two strode and trotted over to the door and set off in search of their quarry.

Chapter 29

"Hey Arthur," said Ford, "remember all that stuff i was saying about you being a nothing nobody from nowhere nohow noville?"

"Noville?"

"Forget it."

"I *had* forgotten it," said Arthur, "until you just brought it up again."

"Well, forget it again. You're famous."

"I am?"

"Very famous."

"Why?"

"No idea. But you're very famous."

Arthur looked around him. He and Ford were sitting at a table in a small eatery next to a large atrium between three convention halls, a family fun park, and a sort of hotel advertising "sleeping drawers for rent!" There were people walking by and other customers at tables around them. "Then why doesn't anyone recognize me?"

"Because they don't know who you are!"

"I thought you said i was famous."

"Look Arthur, i—hold it." Ford squinted past Arthur out into the atrium. Something had caught his eye and it didn't seem right. His keen sense of impending doom was signalling him to the possibility of impending doom. "As your manager Arthur, i say it's time to go."

"Since when are you my manager?"

"All famous people have managers, Arthur."

"I still don't understand why i'm famous."

"I still don't understand why you're not going! Now let's go!" Ford grabbed Arthur's arm and pulled him down a corridor, away from whatever it was that he hadn't seen. They passed by a few impressive-looking doors and then Ford stopped at a not-so-impressive-looking door. He opened it and peeked in, then, after checking up and down the corridor to make sure that no one was watching, he pulled Arthur

into the room.

It appeared to be an employee break room. There were cleaning supplies in one corner, racks of linens and towels along the wall, and in the back, a dingy table with some mismatched chairs, a couple of vending machines, and a video screen on the wall. Ford flicked on the video screen and started flipping through the channels. Arthur stood in the middle of the room and wondered how many towels a place like this went through in a day.

“Aha!” said Ford after a minute. He’d stopped on a news channel that was showing what looked like the aftermath of a terrorist bombing. It took Arthur a moment to realize that the images were of the convention hall that they’d recently blasted their way out of. He recognized the mural that had the drawing of the fledge on it, although it was now in three pieces and lying on its side.

“What happened?” asked Arthur.

“We happened,” said Ford with a grin. “Or, more precisely, *you* happened. Then *i* happened along, and then, well, *that* happened.”

They watched as the news program showed some security footage of Arthur’s abduction by Ford in the armored robotic exoskeleton and the subsequent demolition of many things.

“Neat!” said Ford.

Arthur didn’t have time to decide if all that destruction was “neat” or not, for just after Ford said it, the screen blinked off and all the lights in the room went out leaving Ford and Arthur in complete darkness. There was the clattering of a chair getting knocked over and some scuffling noises, as well as what Arthur perceived to be the word “Belgium” spoken at just above an inaudible level.

“Ford?” said Arthur into the darkness. There was no answer. “Hello?” he tried again. “Is anybody there?”

Again, silence. Arthur spread his arms out and started shuffling toward somewhere to see if he could find a light switch, but he was saved the effort by the door of the break room opening. Light from the corridor flooded into the room, silhouetting a large square figure in the doorway.

“Ah,” said the silhouette in a low gravelly voice. “My quarry.”

“Your what?” said Arthur.

“You, Arthur Dent,” said the silhouette. “You are my quarry.”

“Why am i your quarry?”

“Because you are nothing.”

“Oh,” said Arthur. “What?”

Mr Mingnut switched on the lights and stepped into the room. A medium-sized dog slipped in past him and started sniffing around the linens.

“You are a nothing nobody from nowhere.”

“So i’ve been told.”

“And i aim to keep you that way.”

“Oh. Er, how?”

“I do not know,” said Mr. Mingnut, overpronouncing each syllable. “But i am the greatest tmik-tmik hunter of all time, and you shall not take that away from me!” As he said this, he spread his arms wide, nearly touching the walls. Arthur realized that he himself had been standing this entire time with his arms still stretched out as well and suddenly found this rather comical. He dropped his arms with a slight giggle.

Mr. Mingnut dropped his arms as well, but without a hint of amusement. “Do you find this to be *funny*?”

“Er, no, i...” began Arthur, but he wasn’t sure what to say. He was saved from having to say anything though because there came a voice from the floor.

“Someone else was here,” said Rutlow, staring at the stacks of linens.

“Find him,” said Mr. Mingnut, unusually calmly.

“I’m sorry, but did that dog just talk?” asked Arthur, looking down at Rutlow, then back up at Mr. Mingnut.

“Rutlow is not a dog,” said Mr. Mingnut.

Arthur looked down again at what, to him, was quite obviously a dog and wondered if, since the light had gone out, he’d gone insane.

“The smell of the fresh linens is masking the other odors in the room,” said Rutlow, “but there either is or was someone else in here.”

“We need to know for sure,” said Mr. Mingnut. “Evidence is our

enemy.”

Rutlow started pawing through the towels and Mr. Mingnut moved over to help. Arthur, in an uncharacteristic fit of quick thinking, decided that this would be a good time to run for it. He started sidling towards the door in what he hopes was a very inconspicuous manner but before he'd gotten two steps, the door banged open. Two men dressed in black trench coats and black hats looked quickly at each other, then back into the room. They stepped in and banged the door shut behind them.

“Arthur Dent,” said one of them, “you’re being difficult.”

“I am?” said Arthur.

“Very,” said the other man. “Although not any more, as we’ve found you. But before that—”

“That being now,” said the first man.

“Yes,” said the second man, “before that you were very very very difficult.”

There was a brief pause while everyone in the room looked at each other.

“To find, that is,” said the first man, breaking the silence.

“Oh! Yes, should’ve said that,” said the second man. “Very difficult to find.”

“Excuse me,” said Mr. Mingnut.

“You’re excused,” said the first man. “You may go.”

Mr Mingnut squinted his eyes a bit and lowered his voice to its deepest gravellyness. “I am the greatest hunter in the galaxy—”

“That’s an odd name,” said the first man. “I am #3.”

“And i am #4,” said the second man.

“We run the Universe,” said #3.

“This part of it anyway,” said #4.

Mr. Mingnut glared and went for an ever deeper vocal register. “Arthur Dent is my quarry.”

The two men looked at each other, then back at Mr. Mingnut.

“And?” said #3.

“And i found him first!” growled Mr. Mingnut.

“Oh, right,” said #4. “Well—” and he finished that short sentence

by pulling out a laser pistol and shooting Mr. Mingnut in his barn-sized chest. Mr. Mingnut's eyes popped immediately out of their squint and he staggered back a bit.

"You..." he began.

"Shot you?" said #4. "Yes, but apparently not hard enough." He adjusted his laser pistol and shot Mr. Mingnut again, this time leaving a large hole all the way through his torso. Mr. Mingnut toppled over in a slightly smoldering heap.

Arthur was aghast. "You... you *shot* him!"

The two men looked at each other and then at Arthur.

"Obviously," said #3.

"What did he ever do to you?" asked Arthur, incredulous.

"Look Arthur," said #4, "he was going to die anyway."

"He was?"

"Eventually."

"Eventually?" exclaimed Arthur. "You mean he could have lived a long full life?"

"Long?" said #3. "In the universal timescale, whether his life ended now or if he lived, in your terms, another two hundred years, his life would last about"—he snapped his fingers—"that long."

Arthur fumed over the injustice of it all for a few seconds. "Well if life means so little to you," he finally burst out, "why don't you just shoot yourselves?"

The two men looked at each other, shrugged, pulled their pistols out of their pockets, and shot each other in a double flash of laser light. They slumped to the floor.

Rutlow, who'd been sitting in a corner keeping quiet, trotted over and sniffed the two bodies. He turned and looked at Arthur, who was standing still, looking rather stunned.

"Nice one, Arthur," he said.

There was a flumping noise and Arthur and Rutlow turned to see a shelf full of linens being wiggled off of their shelf from behind. A stack of them fell to the floor to reveal the head of Ford Prefect. "Hey Arthur! You're alive!"

"No thanks to you."

"You should have ducked back here when the lights went out! Plenty of room. You could probably stash a couple of bodies back here and no one would know!"

"How about three?" asked Rutlow.

Ford wiggled his way out of his hiding place and looked around. He whistled. "Who's been doing all the shooting?"

"Well, they shot him," said Arthur, pointing first at the trench coated men, then at Mr. Mingnut.

"Why?" asked Ford, not really caring why but slightly curious.

"I think the best analogy," said Rutlow, "is that they were jumping a claim."

"Ah," said Ford. "So who shot them?"

"They shot each other," said Arthur.

"Why?" asked Ford again, this time much more curious.

"Er, well, because i asked them to," said Arthur.

"What!?" said Ford, clearly surprised. "You just asked them to and they shot each other? Brilliant!"

"Well, i was a bit angry at the time."

"Angry, happy, who cares? I've got to try that the next time i have a laser pistol pointed at my head! Genius!"

"I don't think that—"

"Good! Don't." interrupted Ford.

"What?"

"Think."

"I'm sorry?"

"Don't be that either." Ford looked at the three bodies. "Now, those two will fit back here. This big one i'm not so sure about..."

"Leave him," said Rutlow. "He won't be missed."

"Friend of yours?" asked Ford.

"Hunting companion. Bit of a blerk. Paid well though."

"Right. So, Arthur, up for some evidence tampering?"

"Uh..."

"Great, grab a leg."

In a few minutes Arthur and Ford had stashed the two bodies behind the linens and were now decked out in matching black hats

and trench coats. Arthur felt that if they were trying not to be noticed, wearing long black coats would only make them *more* noticed. Ford agreed, but felt that that was a good thing.

Chapter 30

Trillian looked at herself in a mirror. Did she still have that pretty but tough look necessary for a galactic reporter? Sure, she told herself. Maybe.

She felt a little trepidatious about promising an exclusive interview with Arthur, but she also knew that if anyone in the galaxy could find him, it was Ford, and if anyone could find Ford, it was either half of Zaphod Beeblebrox, and Trillian had always been pretty good at finding one of those halves or the other. So, using the transitive property in a totally unproveable situation, she figured that she had a pretty good shot at finding Arthur.

The shuttle she was riding in bumped to a stop and she heard the airlocks clamping and hissing. The PA system came on and a pleasant voice said "Welcome to Spacon 1. You are docked at Station Luke Bingo Epsilon 29 Left. Enjoy your stay.

Half a tock later, Trillian had interviewed two people who swore that Arthur Dent was twice as tall as she was, had four arms, and was wrestled out of the convention hall by half a dozen Frogstar Battle Robots, a few people who claimed that it was obviously the work of the Kookaburra, and one woman who thought that Arthur was actually a sentient jelly fish.

She did speak with some sane people too and learned of Arthur's conversation with Mr. Mingnut, so she was focused on tracking down this famed tmik-tmik hunter, figuring that finding him might lead to Arthur. She still had feelers out for either Od or Zaph, but neither one was responding so this was the route ahead of her. She felt like a hunter among hunters, only a competent one who was hunting something actually attainable.

She started to remember why she liked being a reporter.

Chapter 31

Zarniwoop stared alternately out the window of the Machina X and at the traffic screen on the console, drumming his fingers every now and then.

"I've received docking telemetry from Spacon 1," said Lucifer. "If you care," he added.

"No i don't, lugnut," said Zarniwoop.

"My name," said Lucifer, in the huffiest voice he could activate from his voice synthesizer module, "is Lucifer."

"Whatever you say, lubejob."

Zarniwoop had forgotten how much fun it was to annoy people. He used to annoy the men in black coats, but they seemed annoyed with him no matter what he did, and it wasn't any fun if it wasn't on purpose.

The old man on the beach was *never* annoyed. Ever. Zarniwoop spent days and days trying to be as annoying as possible and the old man simply didn't get annoyed, or peeved, or bothered, or *anything*. And that drove Zarniwoop to the state he was in right now, which could clinically be described as sub-competent, or below a statistical normal normal, or charting on the low end of insanity. But at this point, Zarniwoop felt that a certain amount of mental incapacity was a fine ingredient to the overall health of an individual. But even he wasn't sure if that was just the insanity talking.

He drummed his fingers some more, hoping that the sound would irritate Lucifer, which it did.

The Kookaburra sat at the controls of her spaceship, tapping the console.

"What are we waiting for?" asked Fenchurch, looking at the viewscreen that the Kookaburra was poring over.

"That," she said, tapping at a spot on the screen. "That spaceship is just sitting there. I think it's waiting for something."

"What could it be waiting for?"

"Probably something there," said the Kookaburra, tapping a larger spot on the screen labeled "Spacon 1."

"Isn't that where Arthur Dent is?"

The Kookaburra leaned back in her chair and eyed Fenchurch for a moment. "How well do you know Arthur Dent?" she asked.

"Oh, not that well, actually. Not as well as i'd like, i suppose."

The Kookaburra looked surprised. "Really?"

Fenchurch smiled and blushed a bit. "Well, he is rather attractive, don't you think?"

The Kookaburra almost laughed, but held it back.

"Well, perhaps he's not your type," said Fenchurch. "But there's something, i don't know, interesting about him... Plus he's almost literally the last man on Earth. Sputty's the only other male Earthling i've met since the Earth was blown up and he... well, he reminds me of my brother." She sat back and remembered her brother and everyone else she ever knew on Earth. This didn't take as long as she expected.

The two women sat for a while lost in their thoughts, the Kookaburra keeping an eye on the display screen, Fenchurch wondering what Arthur Dent was doing right now.

Chapter 32

Arthur Dent was doing what he did best—standing still and looking confused. Ford and Rutlow had just stepped out of the break room to check if the coast was clear. Arthur was just about to follow when there was a hand on his shoulder and he was spun around to find himself face to face with #3 and #4, very much alive and standing there in the same black coats and hats that Arthur and Ford were wearing. This is why he was standing still and looking confused.

“Not so fast, Arthur,” said #3.

“Definitely not,” said #4. “Look at him, forgot how to use his mouth.”

“You... how... what...” sputtered Arthur, trying to gain some traction on the situation and failing miserably. He pointed vaguely in the direction of the two bodies that he and Ford had just stowed behind the linens.

“Oh yes, they’re still there,” said #3.

“After all, you have their coats,” said #4.

“But... but...” said Arthur, still trying and still failing.

“Our life forces aren’t tied to a single reality,” said #4. “So when we shot each other, we popped out of this reality to another one.”

“One where we *hadn’t* shot each other,” added #3.

“Yes, then we came back here,” concluded #4. “Simple, really.”

“Now, if you’ll follow us,” said #3, “we need to take you to our ship.” He stepped over to the door, glanced around, then went out into the corridor. #4 motioned for Arthur to follow #3, which he did, since he couldn’t think of anything else to do.

Once out in the corridor, Arthur noted that there was no sign of Ford or Rutlow, so his immediate hope for rescue was dashed. He wondered if Ford might show up in another laser-spewing robot to rescue him, and hoped that he wouldn’t.

“We may have to shift realities a few times,” said #4 as they proceeded down the corridor, “so watch your step.”

Chapter 33

Zarniwoop tensed. He'd seen it. A dot of light on the view screen had blinked off, back on again, off once more, then finally on. It started to move away from Spacon 1 and Zarniwoop nudged the controls of the Machina X, sending it in pursuit of the mysterious craft.

A bit further away, the Kookaburra nosed her ship in the same direction and followed the other two.

Chapter 34

The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy has a wonderful section on the colossal pygmy gardens of Kakraplee. It also has some great information on where to get a quality toenail bleaching in the discapoid quadrant, how to tell if your Sub-Etha Sens-O-Matic needs adjustment after a passage through the Barnkle pulsar fields, and what to do if the customs official on Pargut 7 seems like he's fishing for a bribe but isn't making any overt whinnying noises (which, in that sector, is the well-known signal that you should offer a bribe).

There are, of course, millions of other bits of useful information in the Guide (and an uncountably large number of non-useful bits), many of which could save your life and most of which could be read on a short-hop freight from Altair Alpha to Altair Gamma if you are a quick reader or don't care at all about retention.

Nearly all of those other bits of information have nothing at all to do with what's happening to Arthur Dent at the moment, but we thought that you should know.

Chapter 35

Arthur was not a fan of shifting realities. It made him go very weak in the knees. At one point, #3 and #4 had shifted them all into a reality where Spacon 1 didn't exist and Arthur found himself hanging in the icy black vacuum of space for a couple seconds before crashing to the floor in a corridor on Spacon 1 again. No, he was not a fan.

And although he was also not a fan of being kidnapped, he was quite relieved to be, after a dizzying trek through various iterations and non-iterations of Spacon 1, settled into a seat on a non-descript gray spaceship heading away from Spacon 1 and firmly situated in one reality.

That firmness was put to the test a few minutes later when they jumped into hyperspace, and it seemed to Arthur that he'd only just become accustomed to the fact that his hair was attached to his head and he once again had exactly ten fingers and ten toes when the fluidity of reality was put to the test again as they dropped out of hyperspace with a "vvvvup!"

Arthur had pretty much determined that his body was human-shaped again by the time the gray spaceship was spiraling down to the surface of a rocky barren planet. No one on board noticed the "vvvup!" of the Machina X appearing in space above them. Nor the "vvip" of the Kookaburra's ship appearing next to the Machina X. Nor the "vvoop" of a third ship appearing next to those two. Nor the "vvop, vvip" of two more ships. Nor even the "vvowp" of a Vogon patrol ship that appeared in the middle of all the rest.

No, the occupants of the plain gray spaceship noticed none of that. But as they disembarked onto the dull rocky landscape, they did notice the fierce laser battle going on far over the stratosphere above them.

"Huh," said #4, looking up.

"What is that?" asked Arthur.

"It appears to be some sort of fierce laser battle," said #4.

"Oh," said Arthur, hoping maybe for a little more explanation than that. He looked around at the unending flat landscape. "Where are we?" he asked.

"Frogstar World B," said #3, heading toward a large black dome which they had landed near and which was the only thing marring the otherwise uninterrupted flatness of the landscape.

Arthur and #4 followed along. As they neared the dome, a hideous scream erupted from around them. Arthur nearly tripped in surprise at the noise, but recovered himself and, as the scream went on, he couldn't help but be reminded of one of those screams that emanate from a corny haunted house ride at a cheap carnival.

"What was that?" he asked as the wailing rolled away into the distance.

"Don't you ever do anything but ask questions Earthling?" said #4. "For being such a big bit of everything, i'd think you'd be more hip."

"That," said #3 as they arrived at the dome and a door slid open in front of them, "is the cry of the last person to be put into the Total Perspective Vortex. But we'll try to keep the screaming to a minimum when we go in." He stepped into what looked like a one-man elevator and the door slid shut.

"You know," said Arthur, looking around and thinking that this would probably *not* be a cheap carnival ride, "i think i've been here before."

Chapter 36

Almost as soon as the Kookaburra's ship popped into space next to the Machina X, Zarniwoop slammed his fist down on the universal transmit button. His face flicked up on the screen next to Fenchurch.

"Go away!" he yelled. "He's mine!"

Fenchurch looked at the Kookaburra. "Can he see us?" she asked.

"No, i disabled the camera," said the Kookaburra, flipping a switch on the panel, "but he can hear us."

"Who said that?" yelled Zarniwoop, mashing his face up next to the screen. "Look, i don't know who you are or what you want but go away! He's mine!"

"Who's mine?" The head of Ford Prefect appeared next to Zarniwoop's and a figure could be seen diving for cover in the background. "Hey, Zarny baby! How's retirement?"

"Prefect!" yelled Zarniwoop, momentarily taken aback.

Another face appeared. An ugly greenish blobular face. And then the face of a woman appeared.

"That's the man, officer!" yelled the women. "That's the man who stole my ship!"

"It was an accident," said Ford.

"What was an accident?" yelled Zarniwoop.

"I'm sorry, is this where the party is?" said another man whose grayish face had just popped up. "Someone told me there was a party here."

"Hoopy!" said Ford.

"Go away!" yelled Zarniwoop.

"Ship stealer!" yelled the woman.

It was at this point that the shooting started.

It was unclear who shot whom first, but everyone was happy to return fire on everyone else. Everyone, that is, except the Kookaburra. Having an all black ship with no lights had an advantage in a situation like that, as it could slowly drift away and nobody would notice it.

That's what the Kookaburra did, and in fact, no one noticed. She headed down to the planet below.

The ships left above kept right on pelting each other with laser fire, doing almost no damage since they were all civilian cruise ships with extremely wimpy armaments that were on the ships mostly as part of dealer option packages. Finally, the Vogon patrol ship in the middle of all this futile firing, which *did* have useful and damaging armaments on it, methodically shot out all the laser cannons on all of the other ships one by one.

"Now then," said the Vogon on the universal broadcast channel, "who stole what ship where?"

Chapter 37

Arthur stepped out of the elevator into a small steel room with a metal box about the size of a refrigerator on one end. #3 was standing in the middle of the room, looking around.

“Gargravarr?” he said.

“I’m sorry?” said Arthur, also looking around the room.

“The caretaker. Gargravarr,” said #3. “Should be here.”

Arthur looked around some more but there wasn’t much in the room except for the metal box and a cable which attached it to a control panel on the wall.

#4 stepped out of the elevator and looked around as well.
“Where’s Gargravarr?” he asked

“No idea,” said #3.

“Well, who’s running the Vortex?”

There was a clanking noise from behind the metal box and all three turned to see a figure shuffle out from behind it. The figure looked dolefully at #3 and #4, then at Arthur. “Oh, you’ve come back. I was quite sure you’d left me here forever.”

“Marvin!” said Arthur, thankful to see a familiar face, although Arthur had to admit to himself that it was difficult to, in general, be happy to see Marvin as he tended to suck the energy out of any conversation.

“Are you the caretaker?” asked #3.

“Where’s Gargravarr?” asked #4.

Marvin looked at each one of them slowly and almost decided not to answer them and shuffle back behind the box in hopes that they’d all go away. But then he decided not to decide that. “Gargravarr left me in charge,” he said, answering both questions at once.

“Where did he go?”

“Away from here.”

“Why?”

“I assume because he hated me. Everybody does.”

“I don’t hate you Marvin,” said Arthur helpfully. It didn’t help.
“Er, i see you’ve got your head back on. That must be nice.”

Marvin stared at Arthur. “Was i missing my head?”

“Er, yes. The last time i saw you, your body was being used by Zaph and your head was, well, it was sitting on a table i believe.”

“Sounds horrible,” said Marvin, looking down at his shiny metal body. “And this happened recently?”

Arthur nodded.

“Then what happened in your past must be my future,” said Marvin. “How depressing. I’m not looking forward to it. In fact, maybe i’ll just stay behind this box until the universe ends. That won’t put any of you out, will it?” He looked at the three others in the room, who didn’t say anything. “No, i thought not.” He started shuffling back behind the metal box.

“Hey, robot!” said #3.

“Marvin,” corrected Arthur.

“Marvin, do you know how to run the Total Perspective Vortex?”

Marvin stopped and looked back. “Oh, it’s incredibly complex,” he sighed. “Hello, yes, condemned to the Vortex? Well, step in, there you go... push the button, screams, help them out, wait for the next one... Brain the size of a planet and i’m pushing a button...”

“Excellent.” said #3, failing completely to grasp the sarcasm dripping in the air. “Well, we’ll just get in here and you push that button.”

#3 stepped into the box and motioned for Arthur to step in next to him. As the box was built for one person and there was currently one person filling it, Arthur wasn’t quite sure what to do.

“It’s spatially regulated,” said #4 from behind him. “It’s built to fit one person, no matter what size that one person is, so it will adjust for one small person, or one very large person, or two regular-sized people—”

“Or three,” said #3, scooting inward as much as he could. #4 gave Arthur a push and Arthur stepped in next to #3. #4 stepped in behind Arthur and while it was a tight fit, there was now enough room for the three of them. #4 shut the door and they stood in total darkness.

“What happens now?” asked Arthur. But no one needed to reply as Marvin had just pushed the button and the entire colossal vastness of the Universe had manifested itself around the infinitesimally small speck that was Arthur, #3, and #4.

Chapter 38

Up until a few ticks ago, Prutstet Vogon Blegm was having a good day. He'd gotten to chase a couple of thieves across space and he actually caught them, which was rare enough, but he also ended up capturing a half-dozen other ships that he felt sure he could charge with something. He had been making a list in his head of possible felonies when all of the people in all of the ships started doing the one thing that he hated most—talking. One was screaming about her stolen ship, another was claiming that he knew the ruler of the Universe, a third one kept saying that he was a reporter for some book and had booklo-matic immunity, and one guy just kept asking where the party was. Blegm jabbed the broadcast override button.

"Now. No one's going anywhere until we figure this out," said Blegm. "And you're all under arrest," he added as a precaution.

"You can't arrest me!" yelled Zarniwoop. "You have no jurisdiction! He's mine!"

"I didn't do anything!" yelled the woman, her face going red. "He stole my ship!"

"Right," said Blegm. "You, with the blotchy face. Which one stole your ship?"

"He did!" she said, pointing at the screen, which to everyone looking appeared as if she was pointing straight back at the viewer.

"Who did?"

"That one!"

"I'm just here for the party," said the grayish man.

"Hey, me too," said Ford.

"The one who just said 'me too!'" said the woman.

"I think that was him," said Ford, pointing in a random direction.

"I don't have time for this!" yelled Zarniwoop. His face blinked off the screen and the engines of the Machina X started revving up.

"No one," yelled Blegm, "is going *anywhere*." He slammed his hand down on one of his favorite buttons. It was one of his favorites

because it did a lot of neat things all by itself. In this case, it automatically fired six Teth-O-Lines with a Magno-Bolt at the ends of each one in six different directions. Before Blegm could gurgle a sign of pleasure, all six ships were securely tied to his yellow patrol ship.

Ford snapped off the communications console and spun around. “Trillian?” he called out, looking around. Trillian popped her head out from behind an overstuffed chair, which, surprisingly, went remarkably well with the decor on the ship. “What are you doing back there?” asked Ford.

“Hiding.”

“Obviously. “Why?”

“Well, i thought it best not to be seen by Zarniwoop. The last time i saw him, Zaphod and i sort of... left him.”

“For dead?”

“No, he was quite alive, and slightly more sane at the time. But we sort of stranded him.

“Ah. He seems a bit unhinged.”

“Well you’d probably go bonkers too if you were left with the ruler of the universe.”

“Vacant sorta guy? With a cat?”

“Yes, that’s him.”

“Never met him. Now... options?”

“Well... this ship is equipped with an escape pod.”

“Hoopy!”

A few ticks later, Ford and Trillian whooshed away towards the planet’s surface while everyone else was still screaming and arguing. Ford had rigged the ship that he’d “borrowed” with a timer so that any second now the engines would come on at full blast. He wasn’t sure what that would do but felt that it would be interesting and he was sorry that he’d miss it.

Chapter 39

The Kookaburra stepped into the metal room in the metal dome on Frogstar World B and cautiously looked around. The only things in the room besides the Kookaburra, were a metal box and a metal robot, which seemed intently interested in the contents of the metal box, which was nothing. She kept her hand hovering near the Zapissimo in the holster on her hip just in case.

“Where’s Arthur Dent?” she asked the robot.

Marvin shifted his gaze slowly from the Total Perspective Vortex to the woman standing by the elevator and then back to the Total Perspective Vortex. Where was Arthur Dent? This was a question that had been bothering Marvin for the past countless number of milliseconds. It perplexed him so much that he hadn’t even bothered to count the milliseconds he was spending on trying to figure out where Arthur Dent was.

It didn’t make sense. Usually Marvin could figure everything out. Everything. And with the Total Perspective Vortex, there wasn’t much to figure out. People went in, there was some screaming and wailing, the machine stopped, the door swung open, and whoever was inside usually sort of flopped out in a quivering heap of abject perspective-induced uselessness. But this time, Arthur Dent and the other two men went in, the machine hummed, no one screamed, the machine stopped humming, the door swung open, and nobody flopped out. This last part was what had Marvin perplexed. He thought about it for another countless number of milliseconds, then turned back to the woman standing by the elevator.

“I don’t...” he began, then faltered. He’d never had to say this about something so obvious as the mechanical motions of a machine before. But there was no way around it. The calculations could be calculated, the probabilities factored, the possible scenarios weighed, but it all came down to this: “I don’t know,” he said at last.

Chapter 40

Arthur stood on a very smooth glassy black surface. In every direction there were stars, except for directly below him, where there were stars reflected in the glossy black surface. It was a little like standing in the middle of space, except that it wasn't cold and he could breathe.

"Where are we?" he asked #3 and #4, who were standing near him.

"Nowhere," said #4.

"Everywhere," said #3.

"Same thing, really," said #4.

"Technically," said #3, "by your limited standards of perception, we're still in the box."

Arthur looked around him. It was much larger than the box they'd stepped into. "So this is what it's like to be in the Total Perspective Vortex?"

"Glerk, man!" said #4, looking slightly exasperated. "Don't you do anything but ask questions? No, of course this isn't what it's like in the Total Perspective Vortex. If it was, your brain would've exploded eons ago."

"The Vortex is a useful tool, Arthur," said #3. Since it provides access to the entire scope of universal existence, we can use that to go anywhere and anytime."

"Or just sit in nowhere, notime for a while," said #4, gesturing around them.

"Now then," said #3, "we need to look at what you've produced so that we can determine the correct custodial schedule for you." He started walking away on the glossy surface. #4 motioned for Arthur to follow.

Arthur was a bit scared to move, though. It was hard to tell that there was anything to walk on as the surface was so glossy that looking down into it was practically the same as looking up. He took a ten-

tative step and found it to be solid, so followed along with #3 and #4. He briefly wondered how there was air to breathe but decided that he'd rather not think about it and instead started thinking about all the things he'd produced. He wasn't much of an artist, but he did work for an ad agency and was quite proud of a campaign he did for Whizzy Wings, a holster-type device for people with incontinent bladders. He'd produced a number of clever ads for them but was disappointed when the product never went to market due to the fact there was a child's pool toy with the same name.

#3 stopped ahead of Arthur and was looking down off the edge of this flat glossy plane that they were on. As Arthur approached, he caught a whiff of a terrible smell, and as he edged up to where #3 was standing, the stench became overpowering. It was like the worst uncleaned public toilet in the world, only ten times worse than that.

When he got to the edge, Arthur saw the reason for the smell. He was looking over a sunken area in the otherwise featureless flat plane that looked like the cargo hold of a ship. In it was a mound of brown sewage the size of a house sitting in an olympic-sized swimming pool of yellowish brown liquid. It stank, and Arthur felt sure that this was the single most disgusting thing that he'd ever seen in the entire Universe.

"What is that?" he said through his hand, which was clenched over his nose and mouth.

#4 looked at him oddly. "Don't you recognize it?"

Arthur looked back. "Of course not!"

"It's what you've produced," said #3.

Arthur turned to him with a questioning look but didn't say anything as he was concentrating on trying to breathe without fainting.

"It's everything that has ever come out of you," said #3 as if this was the most obvious thing in the world, "from every opening on your body, for your entire life."

"Up to this point," added #4.

"Yes," agreed #3. "We didn't bother extrapolating forward in your timeline. Didn't see the need for it. But we did include your trimmings, too. See?" he pointed to a smaller clot of lighter debris floating

next to the larger pile. "Hair, nail clippings, skin cells... We felt that we should be thorough."

Arthur gaped at the two men, as much as one can gape when one is trying to breathe through a hand clamped over one's face. "Why?" he asked.

"By examining what come out of you," said #3 as if he was explaining simple addition to a school child, "we can best determine what goes into you."

"Into me?" said Arthur. #3 nodded. "You mean, what i eat?"

"Of course," said #4, as if, once again, this was the most obvious thing ever.

"Well why... What... How..." Arthur sputtered. Then he calmed himself down so that he could ask these two strange men, in a reasonable way, why they'd kidnapped him, why he was so important, where they were, what they planned to do with him, and why they felt it was necessary to show him everything that, as a human, he'd much rather have somewhere where it wouldn't ever be seen again by anyone, especially himself, preferably spread out over much time and space rather than in one huge heaping display. Arthur took a breath so that he could clearly and forcefully state his position fully. That didn't happen.

The human brain runs on oxygen. The oxygen that keeps the brain conscious and running comes from the blood, via the lungs, via the air in the lungs, via the air surrounding the human being with the brain in question. The first problem for Arthur was that the quickest route for the oxygen surrounding him to get to his brain happened to go right past his nose. The second problem was that the air surrounding him, which contained the oxygen that he needed to keep his brain running, was full of himself, or rather, the far from pleasant aromas emanating from the collected bits of himself that he thought he'd gotten rid of in a tidy fashion thousands of times over the course of his life. These two physical conditions combine to bring about the human conditions of gagging, suppressing vomit, dizziness, and finally fainting dead away, all of which Arthur unceremoniously did.

Chapter 41

Vogons, as a general rule, do not like chaos. Vogons, as a general rule, do not like much of anything unless the thing in question that the Vogon is deciding whether or not to like is both orderly and causing discomfort to someone else, in which case a Vogon generally likes it. Chaos, however, is very far from orderly and, while it certainly may cause discomfort to others, it tends to also cause discomfort to Vogons and so ranks very low on the list of things that Vogons can generally stand—probably just below kittens playing with panda bear cubs.

The kind of chaos that Prutstet Vogon Blegm was currently not at all liking was happening right outside his spaceship and involved lots of other spaceships and a tangled array of cables and a bunch of annoying people on his view screen who were all yelling at each other while they were simultaneously trying to fly their spaceships out of the chaos that they were all in. But because they were all attached to each other by the aforementioned cables, every attempt to get out of the chaos was putting them all further into more chaos, which Prutstet Vogon Blegm did not at all like.

He jabbed a button on his console. He liked jabbing buttons. This was a particularly enjoyable button to jab and it made Blegm happy to jab it. He jabbed it a few more times just to annoy the people on the other ships, since each time this particular button was pushed—the “broadcast all” button—everyone heard a little “ping!”

“Ping, ping, ping, ping, ping...”

“Now listen here,” said Blegm. He paused to let that sink in so that everyone would stop what they were doing and listen to him. Everyone didn’t.

“You’re all under arrest,” he continued, “and if you don’t stop doing everything that you are all currently doing then you’ll all be under further arrest.” Blegm wasn’t exactly sure what constituted being under further arrest, but felt that it must be worse than being under regular arrest. “And,” he went on, “if you still don’t stop, then

i will shoot you all.” This sounded sufficiently threatening to Blegm but not at all threatening to everyone else as they’d all been too busy yelling at each other and trying to move their spaceships to pay attention to the Vogon in their midst.

Blegm squinted his eyes and ran a stubby finger around one of his other favorite buttons—the one marked “fire all.” He was just about to push it when a head that was *not* yelling popped up on his screen.

“Is this where the party is?” said the head.

Blegm paused in his finger-navigation of the “fire all” button. There was something familiar and important-looking about the head on his screen, and Vogons, as a general rule, like things that are familiar and important. He pressed the smaller private communications button. “Does it look like a party to you?”

“Yeah, man,” said the head. “A really ripping one!”

“Well it’s not. So unless you have a high tensile Teth-O-Line cutter on a robotic arm, go away.”

The head bobbed oddly out of sight on Blegm’s screen. He noticed that the head was just that—a head. There was a translucent rubbery cord attached to the bottom of it, like a string to a balloon, but no body below the head, just a head bobbing in the air. Blegm didn’t like that and wondered why a disembodied head would seem familiar to him.

The head bobbed back onto the screen along with a second head just below and off to one side. The second head appeared to have a body attached to it.

“I’ve got a robot with a laser gun,” said the second head. “Will that do?”

Chapter 42

“Robot!” said the Kookaburra.

Marvin looked up from the Total Perspective Vortex just slowly enough to be bothersome but not quite slowly enough to be annoying. “I have a name you know,” he said in a voice just loud enough to be heard but quiet enough to be somewhere between bothersome and annoying.

“Well obviously i *don’t* know,” said the Kookaburra in full-on bothersome mode, “because you haven’t told me.” She gave Marvin a look that would’ve made anyone swallow their pride and humble themselves before such obviousness. Being a robot however, Marvin merely went back to calculating the possibilities of where Arthur Dent and his companions might be.

“And apparently you’re *not* going to tell me,” concluded the Kookaburra, giving up on her withering stare. “So maybe you could tell me how this thing works.” She looked over Marvin’s shoulder into the Vortex.

“Oh, it’s simple really,” said Marvin, diverting a minimal amount of circuits away from his calculations. “It shows you everything.”

“Everything?”

“Everything.”

“That’s it?”

“You want more than everything?”

“Well... What do you mean by ‘everything?’”

Marvin sighed a great metallic sigh. “It shows you all of creation, in all its vastness. Everything. All of life, the Universe... Everything.”

“I’ve heard that phrase before.”

“Yes, well, this is really it.”

“And then what?”

“That’s it.”

“And that drives people insane?”

“Apparently your small animal brains can’t handle the revelation

of just how unfathomably microscopically insignificant you are.”

The Kookaburra stood back and thought about it for a bit. Marvin hummed a song about people with very small brains.

“So,” said the Kookaburra, piecing it together, “you get in, see... everything, go insane.”

“Yes,” said Marvin, adding her to his ever-expanding list of “people who annoy me by saying obvious things.” He had started this list when he was, as he’d been so often since the beginning of his existence, bored. The list currently contained nearly everyone he’d ever met.

“What if you keep your eyes closed?”

Marvin stopped his humming, his calculations, and his list-making. What *would* happen to someone in the Total Perspective Vortex with his or her eyes closed? He set his gigantic brain to the problem and in a few milliseconds had an answer.

“There’s a sixty-three percent chance you wouldn’t go insane,” he said.

The Kookaburra shrugged. “I’ll take those odds.” She walked over to the Vortex and stepped in. “Oh, hang on...” She tapped a button on her wrist. “Sputty!”

“Yeah, boss?” came Sputty’s voice from the communicator on the Kookaburra’s wrist.

“Send our guest down.”

“Which guest?”

“How many guests do we have?”

“Uh, just the one.”

“Right, send her down.”

The Kookaburra and Marvin didn’t say anything as the elevator hummed and soon Fenchurch stepped into the small steel room.

“Oh! Hello, Marvin!” she said, smiling at the robot. Marvin couldn’t smile back, but even if he could have he wouldn’t have.

“I suppose we’ve met before,” he sighed glumly.

“Yes, don’t you remember? You put a cloud thingy in my brain.”

“That sounds awful. I’m not looking forward to it.” he shuffled back behind the metal box that the kookaburra was standing in.

Fenchurch looked questioningly at the Kookaburra, who shrugged.

“So i may go insane shortly,” said the Kookaburra. “And if i do, you’ll have to help me back to the ship.”

“Oh,” said Fenchurch. “OK.”

The Kookaburra swung the door of the Total Perspective Vortex closed, then stopped and popped her head out. “Oh, and Libby’s in charge,” she said, then closed the door.

Chapter 43

Ford walked casually across the desolate wasteland away from where the escape pod had landed. Trillian followed a few steps behind, studying the screen of a personal tablet in her hand.

“Where the spleck are we?” she asked, not looking up.

“No idea,” said Ford.

“Any hits on the sub-etha?

“No idea.”

Trillian stopped and looked up at Ford. “Aren’t you even trying to hitch a ride out of here?”

“Nope,” said Ford, continuing on his leisurely pace. Trillian hurried to catch up.

“Well, do you think maybe you could?”

“Nope,” said Ford again. He pointed out ahead of them. “I wanna see what that bump is.” Trillian looked off in the distance and saw a bump on the horizon. It was the only feature anywhere in view—except for the escape pod behind them—that wasn’t rocks or dirt.

“What is that?” she asked.

“No idea,” said Ford. He started whistling a tune that he was pretty sure was from an advert for nasal cream.

“Fine,” said Trillian, stuffing her tablet back into her bag, “we’ll go see the bump. Not like some of us have a deadline or anything...” She knew that she could hitch a ride out of here herself, but she also knew that Ford had an innate ability to find Arthur so it was probably a good idea to stick with him. Besides, it was usually more fun to stick with Ford, too, and, deadline or not, Trillian still felt that she, of all people, had the best chance of landing an exclusive interview. She walked along wondering what the probability was of getting anything in by deadline.

Chapter 44

The probability of something happening can range from zero (no chance, never, not gonna happen) to one (it is a sure thing, sell the farm, your ship has come in). Or it can be expressed as a percentage, or a negative percentage, or as a relationship such as three-to-one for or a thousand-to-one against. The problem with probability is the same problem with computer science: it all depends on where you start counting from.

Improbability is much easier to understand. Low improbability, very likely to happen: the sun will rise tomorrow. High improbability, very unlikely to happen: the sun will rise tomorrow, turn mauve, go “moo” and sink back down again.

That’s not to say that improbability doesn’t have its problems as well. As any computer scientist, astronomer, or mathematician can tell you, when things get really big, things get really weird. The social scientists are always rubbing the numerical scientists noses in *that* one.

But as far as really big goes, the biggest of the big is infinity. And there are two things in the Universe that really get a grasp on infinity. One is the Total Perspective Vortex, which brings the entire Universe into a metal box. The other is the Infinite Improbability Drive, which brings a metal box to the entire Universe.

These two inventions can be said to occupy the opposite ends of the spectrum of improbability. While the Infinite Improbability Drive pushes improbability to its limits, where anywhere is now, anytime is here, and anything that might happen will, the Total Perspective Vortex takes a snapshot of now, where everything is as it is and the chance of anything different happening is nil because whatever is happening now has a one hundred percent chance of happening simply because it’s happening.

The advantage of using the Total Perspective Vortex for travel, if you happen not to be bound to a single dimension with a linear time-space, is that when you enter the Vortex, you know what you’re deal-

ing with. Everything is as it is. Constant. No surprises.

The disadvantage of using the Total Perspective Vortex for travel is something that you may not be aware of if you're one of those people to whom time and space are just suggestions. If you are one of those people and you happen to bring along a lower-order species to whom time and space are singular and unavoidable, then your excursion into the Vortex would be necessarily propelled along through a billion different Vortexes, each slightly different than the last. The result might be that the Vortex you come out of is not the same as the Vortex you went into.

And of course, since you're in the Total Perspective Vortex end of the improbability scale, the probability of that happening is one hundred percent.

Chapter 45

Most civilized species in the galaxy have a desire to learn—a desire to know things. This is why, when presented with a sudden complete darkness, the first thing that any member of any civilized species will do is open his, her, or its eyes as wide as possible in a near-futile attempt to glean any sort of light out of the pitch-blackness around them. This in turn puts the brain on its widest possible retrieve-all-information setting, which can be a good thing if the merest speck of glimmer in a dark room will save you from an axe-wielding murderer, but is not such a good thing if you happen to have the infinity of the Universe presented in front of you.

This is pretty much how the Total Perspective Vortex works, and it hinges on an open receptive brain that is ready to learn.

The Kookaburra sat in the metal box thinking to herself “i’m in a box, i’m just in a box...”

There was a click, and the entirety of existence was presented all around her. She could feel the unending void. She could hear the cataclysmic silence. Her fingers tingled at the all and nothingness of it. And the smell—it smelled like everything, all at once. Every fragrance in a boiling sea of every other fragrance, recognizable, but too fleeting to identify.

But she saw nothing. No stars, no galaxies, no flecks of light or storming nebulae—just blackness. Her eyes were closed and her brain was defiantly shut off, like a petulant teenager. And as she’d been a petulant teenager for perhaps longer than most, she was quite good at it.

The grand hum of the Universe dropped away and she was suddenly bumped and jostled as if there were now two people in the box with her, one on either side. Then the quality of the air changed, there was light on the other side of her eyelids, and the back of the box melt-

ed away and she tumbled over backwards onto soft ground. She moved out a hand and felt warm dirt. Was she really outside or was this some trick of the Vortex? She lay still and kept her eyes shut.

“Who are you?” said a voice above her.

“Where’s Arthur Dent?” said another voice.

The Kookaburra was beginning to surmise that she wasn’t in the Total Perspective Vortex anymore. She opened one eye just a crack. There was a pair of boots surrounded by a black trench coat next to her. She tried the other eye and found the same thing on the other side.

“Well?” said the first pair of boots. “Do you talk?”

At this the Kookaburra snapped open both eyes and looked up. She was lying in the middle of a dirt road running by some long-neglected fields. On either side of her was a man in a dark hat and trench coat, each one frowning down at her. Above them was a blue sky with white puffy clouds. There was a gentle breeze and it felt very much like what might be referred to as a pleasant spring day.

The Kookaburra stood up and eyed the two men.

“Now then,” said the first man, “who are you and what have you done with Arthur Dent?”

“I could ask the same of you,” said the Kookaburra, residual petulance lingering.

“Indeed you could,” said the first man.

The Kookaburra lowered her eyelids halfway and made a little grumbling noise. She turned to the second man. “Who’s he?” she asked, pointing at the first man.

“He’s #3.”

“Right. And who are you?”

“I’m #4.”

“Got it. And who’s that?” The Kookaburra pointed behind the two men and they both spun around to see whom she was pointing at. It didn’t take them very long to realize that she was pointing at no one, and it took them even less time to realize that, in the time it had taken them to turn around and back again, she had taken a couple steps backwards and now stood squarely in front of them with a very nice

and deadly Zapissimo in her hand, the business end of which was pointed in their direction.

“Now that we all know each other...” she began.

“Wait, what’s your name?” said #3.

The Kookaburra eyed him coldly. “I don’t have a name,” she replied.

“Then how do people get your attention?” said #4.

“They don’t.”

“Ah,” said #3. “Useful.”

“Yes,” said #4. “We should try not having names.”

“You don’t have names,” said the Kookaburra. “You have numbers.”

“They still identify us though, don’t they?” said #3.

“I like this idea,” said #4. “I think that from now on i shall be...” and he put both hands out in front of him, slightly out to the sides, and looked up to the sky.

“Cool!” said #3. “And i’ll be...” He glanced down and to the left with his right arm over his stomach.

#4 turned to the Kookaburra. “Do you have a pose?” he asked.

The Kookaburra wanted to squint and sneer and pout and snarl but she tried very hard to not move at all. “Look,” she said, “tell me where we are and where the nearest spaceport is.”

“We’re on Golgafrincham,” said #3.

“And the nearest spaceport is not on Golgafrincham,” said #4.

“Then how do you plan to leave?” said the Kookaburra.

“Oh, we’ll probably just never arrive,” said #4. “That’d be easiest.”

The Kookaburra was just starting to try to figure out what #4 meant but was prevented from this task due to the fact that she was shoved to the ground from behind. She rolled over to see that a third man in a black hat and trench coat had appeared and was now standing above her with the business end of her own Zapissimo directed at her head.

“Who are you?” said the Kookaburra, “#5?”

“No, i’m him,” said the man, pointing at #3.

"It's true, he is," said #3.

"Shut up, you," said the new #3, and he shot the previous #3 dead on the spot.

"Now then," said #4, "we'll be off. But you, i'm afraid, will remain."

There was a flash of light and everything went dark.

Chapter 46

High above Frogstar World B, a lone robot drifted between a tangled cluster of spaceships, methodically cutting them away from the Teth-O-Lines which ensnared them all. While the robot toiled, Prutstet Vogon Blegm loudly and repeatedly broadcast on all channels that everything that happened was extremely illegal, no one should leave the scene, and they were all under arrest multiple times over. One by one the spaceships shot off in various directions, happy to be away from what was clearly *not* a party and even happier to be ignoring a Vogon.

Far below this, on the rocky barren surface of Frogstar World B, Ford and Trillian approached the dome that they'd been walking toward. There were two spaceships parked near it and two figures standing near one of the ships. Ford, as usual, approached without any caution whatsoever.

"Hi!" he said, holding his hand up with his four fingers split down the middle in a V.

"Hey, mate," said Sputty. "Where'd you come from then, eh?"

"Oh, back that way," said Ford, gesturing vaguely behind him.

Sputty peered over Ford's shoulder to the uninterrupted expanse of very little. "How far?"

"Er, a bit," said Ford, holding his hands out in front of him as if he was measuring a large fish.

Sputty considered this. "You on walkabout then?"

At this, Trillian looked at Sputty curiously. "Are you from Australia?" she asked.

"Yeah! You've heard of it?"

"I'm from London."

"No kiddin'? The gal the Kookaburra's with in the dome down there, she's from London too!"

"Wait a tick," said Ford. "The Kookaburra? *The Kookaburra?*"

"That's right, mate," said Sputty. "We're her, uh, cohorts i guess

you'd call us. I'm Sputty, that there's Libby." Libby waved.

"Her?" said Ford. "You mean the Kookaburra's a her?"

"Didn't you know that?" said Trillian

"Now that you mention it," said Ford, "probably." He looked back at Sputty. "Ford Prefect. This is Trillian Astra."

Pleasure to meetcha," said Sputty. He looked closely at Trillian. "Say, you look kinda familiar. Ever been to Adelaide?"

"Sorry, no," said Trillian. "But i was a major events reporter for GalaxNews for a while. Maybe you've seen me on the news."

"Hmmm..." said Sputty, sizing up Trillian again. "Yeah, that must be it..." although he didn't sound convinced.

"So where's this Kookaburra?" said Ford. "I'd like to tag along on a couple raids. Sounds like a blast."

"And do you suppose i could get an exclusive interview?" added Trillian.

"Hey, whoa," said Sputty. "The Kookaburra ain't takin' on no new crew, although she just did a bit ago, but you'd hafta ask her yourself. And she don't do interviews, but again, you'd hafta ask her yourself, but if it was me, i wouldn't ask her."

"Oh, so..." started Ford, trying to figure out if he should pursue this line of questioning further. He didn't. But he wouldn't have had the time anyway because just then there was a soft "ding!" and the door of the elevator in the side of the metal dome slid open.

"Fenchurch!" said Ford and Trillian at the same time.

"How are ya?" said Ford.

"What are you doing here?" said Trillian.

"Where's the Kookaburra?" said Sputty.

"Er, well," said Fenchurch, looking at all three of them. "I don't know."

Chapter 47

Prutstet Vogon Blegm watched his screen as the many angry faces blipped out. He felt conflicted. He was angry that the heads on the screen were leaving which meant that he couldn't arrest them, but he was also relieved that they were all leaving so he wouldn't have to go through the bother of arresting them.

Eventually only two heads remained, and they belonged to the same body. The first head was where a normal head should be, the second floated above it, attached at the neck by a translucent spinal cord-like thing. This let the head keep bobbing up out of frame, which irritated Blegm. He pushed the communicate button.

"You're under arrest," he said.

"You can't arrest me," said the head that wasn't floating out of view, "I'm Zaphod Beeblebrox!"

"Who?" said Blegm. He didn't really care who, but was playing for time while he thought of something to arrest this man for.

"Zaphod Beeblebrox, man!" said Zaphod's floating head. "The hoopiest frood in seventeen quadrants! The guy you'd kill to have at your party! Number two on the list of all time gentleman criminals!" He paused to see if any of that had registered with the Vogon. None of it had. "The President of the Galaxy!" added the other head.

"You're not the President of the Galaxy."

"Am too."

"Are not."

"Am too!" said both of Zaphod's heads.

In what is considered by many galactic historians as the only time in recorded history that a Vogon did not act more childish, in an interaction with someone who was not a Vogon, than that non-Vogon person, Blegm decided not to say "are too" again. Instead, he said "The President of the Galaxy is Arthur Dent. And you're not Arthur Dent."

"Arthur Dent?" said both of Zaphod's heads, both pairs of eyes bugged out. "The apeman? How'd he get to be President of the

Galaxy?"

"I don't know how Arthur Dent became President of the Galaxy and i don't care how Arthur Dent became President of the Galaxy, but Arthur Dent is the President of the Galaxy and you're not Arthur Dent, you're Haywad Mumblerocks or something and you're under arrest.

"Stop saying Arthur Dent," said Zaphod, annoyed.

"Aaaaaaarrtthhhhhuuuuuuuuuurrrrrr," said Blegm, very slowly and very annoyingly, "Dent."

Zaphod squinted all four of his eyes and pushed a button. There was a quick *pow*, a large flash, and Blegm had just enough time to consider the fact that his last words were "Arthur Dent" before he and his ship were, with startling finality, blown up.

"Shouldn't have said that," muttered Zaphod to himself.

He sat down in the captain's chair and fired up the engines. He had a purpose now. He'd been out of the public eye for too long. Sure, there was a bit of a tax problem that he'd dodged by removing a head for a while, but that had gotten old. He missed the limelight. Some half-evolved simian had taken his job as President of the Galaxy, this mysterious Kookaburra was threatening his position on the all time list of gentleman criminals, he hadn't had a really decent omelet in ages, and worst of all, he wasn't the most famous person in the galaxy anymore.

Something had to be done. Something big. He wasn't sure what it was yet, but he knew that it had to be not just big, but really really really big.

He jammed on the engines and blasted away, leaving a scattering of spaceship and Vogon debris, severed Teth-O-Lines, and one depressed robot, floating among it all, peering gloomily down at Frogstar World B and recalling the exact song he'd invented that exact day after everyone had left him, again, in the Total Perspective Vortex.

The song was about fairy cakes.

Chapter 48

Arthur woke up. He felt very alone in a very dark place but was relieved to find that the air smelled very normal, if a little musty. He opened his eyes, but that didn't help, as it was still quite black. It felt as though he was still on the flat glossy black plane of nothingness except that someone had turned all the stars off and there was a slight mumbling noise, as if a crowd of people were perhaps just out of reach.

He stood up. "Hello?" he said to the emptiness. "Is anybody there?"

Chapter 49

Max Quordlepleen stood calmly behind the curtain. He ran his finger across his magnificent white teeth, then slicked back his thinning hair. He treasured this moment—this moment of calm anticipation before the spotlights flicked on, the curtain opened, and the applause rolled onto the stage and over him like a flood of power. And he used that power. He fed the audience what they wanted and in return, they gave him life.

Sure, the gig at the Restaurant at the End of the Universe was fantastic and all, but these speaking engagements were the cherry and the whipped cream on the fairy cake of his life. He could talk about whatever he liked. He could tell the audience all about being Max Quordlepleen and how amazingly awesome that was, and they ate it up. And when the audience was happy, Max was happy. Plus, each speaking engagement paid roughly half a year's salary, and that made Max very happy as well.

He closed his eyes and took a few calming deep breaths. It was almost time. Time to put on a show and enrich these people's bland peasant-like lives, and at the same time, enrich his own life as well, although for Max it was strictly in monetary terms.

The curtain parted, the spotlights hit his piano keyboard of modern dentistry, the applause swelled... then it diminished some.

Max flicked his eyes around the stage. There, right in the middle of it, was a man, standing. Standing on *his* stage. Max quickly diverted to one side, but the spotlight operators, obviously oblivious to the fact that that they should keep their lights on the man with the blinding array of teeth, held steady on the blinking man in the center of the stage. Max was forced to confront this intruder and just as quickly as he'd diverted his route, he stepped back into it and strode confidently toward center stage. He stepped in front of the bewildered man who was shielding his eyes from the bright spotlights.

"Get off my stage!" muttered Max through his gleaming front

grille to the man as he stepped past him. The man seemed startled that Max was there and dropped his hands from in front of his face.

There was a rising murmur from the crowd and Max sensed the unease. He smiled and waved, nodded in various directions, then casually strolled to the left a bit, but the spotlight operators seemed determined to stay on the blinking man in the middle of the stage. The tension and murmuring grew until someone called out "It's Arthur Dent!"

At this, Max snapped his head around and took a close look at the mystery man at the center of his stage. In a sudden change, well-oiled by years of professionalism, Max bounded back to the frightened-looking man, grabbed his arm, and held it up high. "Ladies and gentleman!" he proclaimed loudly and enthusiastically, "the President of the Galaxy!"

There was a thundering of applause and Max soaked it all in, flashing his lottery-winning smile at Arthur, who looked, as Arthur was prone to look, a bit confused.

Chapter 50

Arthur was coming around to the fact that he appeared to be in the normal world again. Max had ushered him a bit too forcefully off the stage and he now found himself in a quiet carpeted hallway that led to an atrium where he could see some people milling about. He headed that way.

The calm and quiet of the hallway ended abruptly when Arthur stepped into the atrium. Shouts of “it’s Arthur Dent!” and “Mr. President!” rang out as a sudden crowd of people crushed around him. Microphones and cameras were stuck in his face and a hundred questions piled up on top of themselves in a white noise of news bites.

Arthur was hustled onto a small stage that had appeared out of nowhere by two very large men with very dark sunglasses who had also appeared out of nowhere. They thrust him behind a podium and stepped back, talking quietly into their wrists. The crowd of reporters gathered in front of the stage and kept up the cacophonic barrage of questions until Arthur held up his hands in a gesture that he hoped meant “shut up.”

It did, and they did. For the very briefest of time, anyway. Then the cries of “Mr. President! Mr. President!” began again as each reporter tried to get Arthur’s attention.

Arthur wasn’t at all sure why everyone seemed to think that he was President of the Galaxy but seeing as how there were two very large men behind him and a crowd of reporters in front of him and he didn’t really have much of an escape route, he figured that he ought to act presidential. Unfortunately, the only times he’d ever seen presidents, they’d all been giving speeches which seemed to involve very grave expressions and succinct hand gestures to emphasize key points in the speech. Arthur tried to remember what any of those key points might be but came up with nothing. Finally he picked a random reporter out of the crowd and pointed at him, in what he hoped was a dignified and presidential way.

“Are you enjoying your stay on Spacon 1?

“Is that where i am?” An array of cameras clicked as he spoke and the reporters all scribbled notes on their tablets.

“How was your flight?”

“Er, well, i didn’t actually take a flight.”

“Do you have any plans for the economy?”

“The economy?”

“What do your critics think of you?”

“I don’t know, really.”

“Have you selected a vice-president yet?”

“Um, no. Should i?”

“What’s your position on the situation in Bloggabagoobla?”

Arthur paused at this one. He had no idea where Bloggabagoobla was, let alone what the situation on it was, and he didn’t want to say the wrong thing and start a war or something. Politicians always seemed to be able to answer questions without actually answering anything—he’d have to do that. Before he could attempt his non-answer though, a voice called out from the back of the room.

“What do you get when you multiply six by nine?”

Arthur looked up. All the reporters swiveled their heads around. Zaphod Beeblebrox stood there, feet apart, shoulders squared, one head at a jaunty angle, the other bobbing off to one side like a day-old balloon. With one hand, he saluted. With another, he waved to all the reporters. And with the third, he raised a Kill-O-Zap II, pointed it straight at Arthur, and fired.

Chapter 51

"So she just vanished, then?" said Trillian, looking at the dome of the Total Perspective Vortex, then back at Fenchurch.

"Well, she got in the box, Marvin turned on the—"

"Marvin's down there?" interrupted Ford

"Oh, yes," said Fenchurch. "I should have said. Although he didn't seem to know who i was."

"Probably faking it," said Ford

"Did he happen to know where Arthur was?" asked Trillian

"No, he didn't say... maybe the same place that the Kookaburra went? Well, anyway, Marvin turned on the machine, then off again, and when the door opened up again, there was no one there. The Vortex was empty.

"That's rare for a vortex," said Ford. "People don't know this, but there's a lot of stuff in a vortex."

"I'm going in there," said Trillian. She stepped into the elevator and the door slid shut.

"So now what?" said Libby after they'd all watched the door of the elevator doing nothing for a while.

"Good question," said Sputty. "We're a gang without a leader."

"Ooh, ooh!" said Ford, raising his hand and hopping up and down. "Can i be your leader? Can i?"

"I dunno, mate," said Sputty. "You a good leader?"

"Terrible," said Ford. "Absolutely bloody retchedly awful at it. You wouldn't last two ticks in a time hole with me at the helm. Just dreadful, really."

"Not much of an endorsement, mate."

"No, i suppose not," said Ford, pretending to think about it briefly and flicking an imaginary bug off of his nose. "Still, can't be helped. You need a leader, i'm standing here. Might as well make plasma while the halo's cresting y'know."

"Now look," started Sputty, then he stopped.

“Look at what?” said Ford.

“How ‘bout that?” offered Fenchurch, pointing up into the sky. They all looked up. A familiar-looking spaceship was spiraling down towards them. It flared out and began settling down just above the spaceship that had been parked at the Total Perspective Vortex since before any of them had arrived. As it sank lower and closer to the ship beneath it, they all realized why this ship looked so familiar. It was the exact same ship as the one it was settling down on top of. And it wasn’t just an exact copy of the other ship, it was, in fact, the *exact* same ship. This fact was hammered home to all the spectators when the top ship landed in the exact same spot where the bottom ship was parked, the two ships blending into one like an out-of-phase stereo image resolving itself into a single entity.

“Weird,” said Fenchurch.

“Cool!” said Ford.

“Bugger!” said Sputty.

The engines wound down, a hatch popped open, and two men in black trench coats and black hats stepped out.

“Right,” said #3, waving a Kill-O-Zap at all of them. “This has gone on long enough.”

“Is anyone here from Earth?” said #4. “Sol 3, Sector ZZ9-Plural-Z-Alpha?”

“We all are, mate,” said Sputty, taking the warning gestures that Ford was making as another attempt to rid himself of a nonexistent bug. “What’s it to ya?”

“You’re *all* from Earth?” said #3, surprised. “All of you?”

“Er, just out of curiosity,” said Ford, “if one of us was from this Earth place that you speak of, what’s the likelihood that that person might get shot by that lovely laser pistol in your hand?”

“Depends how annoying they are,” said #3.

“Ah. I see,” said Ford. “And just out of further curiosity, if one of us happened to be from, say, oh, i don’t know, maybe some small planet in the vicinity of Betelgeuse, how would that affect the probability of being shot at by that same lovely pistol?”

“Depends how much they might want to interfere while we round

up the Earthlings."

"Right," said Ford. He pointed at the others. "Earthlings." Then he pointed at himself. "Not Earthling. I'll just be over here not interfering." He casually strolled away around the back side of the Total Perspective Vortex dome, whistling an old war tune about being shot in half with a laser pistol.

Dimber Deenie, space mariney
Went off to war to have some fun
Dimber Deenie, space mariney
Got shot in half with a laser gun.

Chapter 52

The Ballad of Dimber Deenie is a classic of mid-galactic literature. School children have been forced to memorize passages from the ballad for generations, and they universally find the first two couplets fascinating and don't remember any of the rest. There are, in fact, over two hundred and eight verses to the ballad (no one knows exactly how many for sure, and the number changes region to region), but since all of the excitement and tension in the narrative take place in the fourth line—Dimber Deenie getting shot in half—there's not much left to really keep anyone's attention.

The basic storyline of *The Ballad of Dimber Deenie* involves Dimber Deenie going to war, getting shot in half, then coming home to find that it's hard to live as only half a man. There's probably a whole lot of other things that go on in the tale, too but no one really cares and so generally, when *The Ballad of Dimber Deenie* is performed, the first four lines are sung, suggestions are taken from the audience for more verses, then the first four lines are sung again. The band Giggleblast had a charting hit with a version of *The Ballad of Dimber Deenie* where the only words in the entire song were "Dimber Deenie, shot in half" repeated three hundred and eighty seven times.

Chapter 53

It is an odd thing to have a Kill-O-Zap laser pistol fired at you. It is, in fact, an odd thing to have *any* kind of laser pistol fired at you. But it is an even odder thing to have a large man in dark sunglasses hurl himself in front of you, taking the shot and falling to the ground in a heap. What's more, it's a monumentally odd thing to have this happen six or seven times, shots blazing over a crowd of reporters who are frantically scribbling on their pads as large dark-sunglassed men appear out of nowhere to hurl themselves to their sacrificial doom, until the shooting stops because there is a pile of dead bodies in the way.

Arthur peeked out from behind the pile of large men in front of him. Zaphod fired off a few more rounds and a few more large men appeared out of thin air and dove into the blasts.

“Stop shooting me!” yelled Arthur.

“I’m not!” yelled Zaphod back at him.

“Who’s shooting you?” asked a reporter.

“Someone get help!” yelled Arthur.

“Why do you need help?” asked another reporter.

“I’m being shot at!”

“Who’s shooting at you?”

“Zaphod Beeblebrox!”

“Who’s Zaphod Beeblebrox?”

“He’s the man that’s shooting at me!”

“Why is he shooting at you?”

“I don’t know why! Can’t someone get help?”

“What do you need help for?”

“You just asked that!”

“No, that was Andromeda news. I’m with Star Cluster Today. Do you have a statement about your situation?”

“HELP!” yelled Arthur, completely exasperated. “There is a madman shooting at me and he seems quite bent on killing me! Please go

get some help!"

"How do you know that *you're* not the madman?"

"What?"

"We need to remain objective. We can't take sides in a shooting. Do you have any proof that you're not a madman?"

"I'M NOT MAD!" screamed Arthur at the top of his lungs. He leaned against the pile of bodies in frustration as the press peppered the air with questions.

"You sound mad. Can you give us a statement on that?"

"Mr. President, it's been said that you're mad. Care to comment?"

"Mr. President, why the stepped up security? Should the public be worried?"

"Mr. President, rumors are flying that the public is worried, can you categorically deny that there's no terrorist threat at this time?"

"Mr. President, are there specific terrorist threats that we need to know about? What information are you withholding? Is there a cover-up?"

"Mr. President, there appears to be a massive government cover-up. What are you hiding from?"

"I'm hiding from the man who's shooting at me!" yelled Arthur. "And if someone doesn't do something, i'm going to be shot dead!"

"You can't be shot dead," said Zaphod, stepping around the pile of bodies and startling Arthur so completely that he nearly fell down. "Watch."

Zaphod lifted the Kill-O-Zap and shot at Arthur. A large man in sunglasses appeared in the space between them, took the blast, and fell dead.

"See?" said Zaphod. "You're the President of the Galaxy. You can't be shot. I'd forgotten about that."

Arthur regained some semblance of composure and looked around at the carnage surrounding him. It was horrifying but at the same time, very impressive.

"So," continued Zaphod, "I'll just have to kidnap you for now, kill you later." He grabbed Arthur's arm and dashed off down a corridor,

dragging Arthur behind.

"Do we need to run?" asked Arthur, trying to keep up without tripping.

"Look behind you." Arthur looked back to see the crowd of reporters in full pursuit, shouting out questions about terrorist plots and government conspiracies. As much as he wasn't keen on being kidnapped (again), this definitely seemed like the better place to be. He quickened his pace and ran down the corridor with Zaphod to who-knew-where.

Chapter 54

Trillian hadn't gotten much information out of Marvin except that Arthur, two men in black trench coats, and the Kookaburra had all entered the Total Perspective Vortex and disappeared. And as Marvin had seemed even more morose than usual, Trillian didn't feel like hanging around and chatting. She wouldn't have wanted to anyway, even if Marvin weren't terminally depressed.

She took the elevator back up and stepped out onto the surface of Frogstar World B. The first thing that she noticed was that one of the ships was gone. The second thing that she noticed was that all of the people were gone. She looked around for a third thing to notice but there was no third thing.

She walked over to the sleek but functional black spaceship that remained and peered into the entryway, which was open. "Hello?" she called out. "Is anybody there?"

Ford bounded into view from somewhere inside the ship. "Trillian!" he said with a grin. "Of course i'm here. What a nubby thing to say!" He disappeared back into the ship. "Look!" he called out. "Arthur's on the news!"

Trillian hurried into the ship, worried that someone had beaten her to an exclusive interview with Arthur Dent. She stepped into the main cabin where Ford had flopped onto a couch and was watching the video screen. On it, Arthur was apparently trying to give a news conference from behind a pile of bodyguards. She smiled, knowing that she still could get an exclusive and that, as she'd thought, Ford had led her to Arthur.

Chapter 55

Zaphod led Arthur out of the corridor and into a large exhibition hall. Zaphod was never one to think a plan all the way through and this was less thought through than most. As soon as they got into the hall, someone screamed "It's Arthur Dent!" and pandemonium ensued. The crowds in the hall surged toward them from one side, the reporters closed in from the other, and Arthur prepared himself as best he could, as much as one can prepare oneself in such a situation, for an imminent crushing. Zaphod just whirled around trying to decide whom to shoot first. It didn't take him long to decide.

"Nobody move!" shouted both of Zaphod's heads at once, "Or i'll assassinate the President of the Galaxy!"

As he said this, he jammed the tip of the Kill-O-Zap to the side of Arthur's head. It was an amazingly effective maneuver, as the pressing crowds and crowding press all stopped and became nervously still.

"Right, now move away... move away..." Zaphod nudged Arthur in a random direction and the crowd slowly shifted away. They didn't exactly part for the pair, just sort of kept a bubble of open space around them as they moved through the hall, but that was good enough for Zaphod and he prodded Arthur along the hall, the crowd shifting with them.

"Er, Zaphod," said Arthur quietly, "i thought you said that you couldn't shoot me."

"I can't," whispered Zaphod back, "but *they* don't know that." One of his heads gave Arthur a quick maniacal grin while the other smiled and nodded at people in the crowd, as if Zaphod was a celebrity making his way slowly down a red carpet.

"That brings up another thing," said Arthur. "Why are you trying to kill me?"

"I want your job."

"You can have it. I don't want it." Arthur thought about that for a bit. He was surprised how much thinking he could do while being

walked slowly along with a laser gun to his head. “By the way, how did i get to be President of the Galaxy? I wasn’t aware that i was even running.”

“You just *were* running. Back in the corridor.”

“I meant for office.”

“What were you doing in an office?”

Arthur grimaced. “I wasn’t elected, Zaphod. How did i get to be President if i wasn’t elected?”

“Hey, good question, monkey man! Your species must think harder when there’s a gun to your head.”

“It does tend to focus the senses, i’ve noticed.”

“Well, see if your big simian brain can handle this,” said Zaphod as he maneuvered them around a potted plant and towards an exit, the crowd flowing and following all the while. “You’re the most famous person in the galaxy.”

“I am?”

“Don’t interrupt me when i’m explaining something. I don’t often explain anything and if this crowd would get out of our way faster i wouldn’t bother, but as we have some time, try to pay attention. You’re the most famous person in the galaxy.”

“OK.”

“And if i kill you, then *i’ll* be the most famous person in the galaxy.”

Maybe it was the gun to his head that was making Arthur’s thoughts so clear, but he had to admit that this made perfect sense. It was what happened next that didn’t make any sense.

“Stop right there!” yelled a voice. A man wrestled his way to the front of the crowd and stood in Zaphod and Arthur’s path. He was holding a small but still quite deadly laser pistol and it was pointed directly at Zaphod and Arthur.

“Hey, Zarniwoop, you old frood!” said Zaphod much too happily. “How ya doin’?”

“How am i doing? How am i doing!?” yelled Zarniwoop, more than slightly peeved. “I’m doing great! That’s how i’m doing! And do you want to know why?”

"Not really, no," said Zaphod, more than slightly too casually.

"Because i'm going to kill you, that's why! I'm going to kill you for leaving me on that zarking planet with those zarking men and their zarking hats and that crazy zarking man and his zarking blerky cat!"

"Oh, yeah, how was that place?"

"And then when i'm done killing you, i'll take your hostage! I'll be the hero, Zaphod, and you'll be dead!"

"I've had worse."

"Worse!?" spluttered Zarniwoop, nearly foaming at the mouth.
"What's worse than dead?"

"Small town community theater?" suggested Zaphod. At this, he stepped back and shot his Kill-O-Zap straight at Arthur. Zarniwoop fired at Zaphod, but since Arthur was between the two of them, his shot also went straight at Arthur. Two bodyguards materialized, dove, and fell dead on either side of a somewhat stunned Arthur.

In less than a tick Zaphod and Zarniwoop fired off ten or twelve shots each, the crowd scattered, and Arthur, in danger of being crushed by a tower of large dead men, ran for it. Zaphod dove for cover behind the potted plant and Zarniwoop fired off a few more shots in that direction before running off after Arthur. The potted plant took it all in stride, deflecting the shots with a couple of fronds before settling back to being uncomplicatedly potted.

Chapter 56

Blood.

Chapter 57

Zarniwoop hauled Arthur into a small unused conference room and sealed the door.

“All right, Dent, i want your job.”

“You want it too? You’re welcome to it.”

“Not that stupid President of the Galaxy job that Zaphod’s on about! I want your Guide job!”

“My what?”

“Don’t play dumber than you already look, Dent. You’re the C.E.O. of the Guide and that used to be my job and i want it back!”

“I’m the what?” said Arthur, putting on his most sincere completely confused face.

“The Chief Executive Officer of the Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy! How many jobs do you have?

“Well, until a bit ago, i thought that i didn’t have any, but now apparently i have two.”

Zarniwoop surveyed Arthur, trying to decide if he was just playing at being completely dim or if he was, in fact, completely dim. He decided to bypass the question and try a different tack. “Where’s Fonk?” he asked.

“Fonk? Er, i’m not sure exactly. Haven’t seen him in quite a while.”

“Listen Dent, i—”

There was a knock on the door. Zarniwoop went very still. There was another knock. Then there was a laser blast and the door exploded into very many little pieces. Zarniwoop spun away from Arthur and started firing his laser pistol randomly through the debris. None of the shots hit anything except a metal box about the size of a small chest of drawers which slowly rolled into the room, laser shots bouncing off of it.

“Hello,” said a very calm and soothing voice from the box. “I am a negotiation robot. You appear to have taken a hostage. Would you

like to talk about it?”

“No,” snarled Zarniwoop. He fired off a few more shots that bounced off of the robot’s osmicarbonate anti-laser protective casing.

“You seem agitated,” said the robot. “Would you like to talk about it?”

“I said no. Now go away!”

“I’m sorry, i can’t do that. Do you think i can help you?”

“Stop asking questions!”

“Do you think that would make you feel better?”

“Maybe i don’t want to feel better, you zarking crap bucket!”

“There’s no need for profanity.”

“Belgium!”

“There’s no need for profanity.”

“You just said that.”

“I’m sorry, did saying that upset you?”

“I’m upset already, you... you... Dent! Help me think of a good insult for this robot!”

“Yes, i am a robot. Does that upset you?”

Zarniwoop spun around, looking for Arthur, but Arthur, seeing that Zarniwoop was busily engaged with the robot, had quietly snuck over to the other side of the room and out a second door. “DENT!” Zarniwoop yelled to the empty room.

“I’m sorry, could you repeat that?” said the robot.

“Where’d he go?” Zarniwoop yelled at the robot, kicking a few chairs over to emphasize his point.

“I don’t know that. Would you like to talk about it?”

Arthur was, in fact, in a corridor running toward an atrium, but that wasn’t at all surprising since nearly every corridor on Spacon 1 led eventually to an atrium. And from these atriums you could go to convention halls or screening rooms or conference rooms or another corridor which would lead to another atrium and more halls and rooms.

What Arthur really wanted right now was a map or an informa-

tion booth—somewhere where he could figure out where he was, where might be a good place to go to, and with luck, where he might find a spot of tea. He hadn't had any tea in far too long at it was making him irritable. Although just the thought of ingesting tea or anything else got him to thinking about what he, as #3 and #4 had called it, produced, and where it all might go to and that thought was making him less interested in ingesting anything, even tea.

He walked into an atrium and, not finding anything helpful except potted plants, none of which were tea plants, he decided to enter the nearest convention hall. It took a moment for Arthur to realize that the hall he'd just stepped into was the tmik-tmik hunter's convention hall. It took a further moment for someone to recognize him and scream out his name. The moments following that were, for Arthur, a blur of crowds, faces, and things being shoved in front of him—mostly pens for autograph, cameras, and microphones. But there was also a tambourine, a spatula, and what looked like a purple wig with antennae.

Arthur hemmed his way through a multitude of 'hello's and 'thank you's and tried to answer the questions being peppered at him, most of which were "who are you?", "where have you been?", and "what do you think about the situation in ____", where ____ was some place that Arthur had never heard of.

Arthur was just starting to realize that all he really needed to do to appease the autograph-seekers was to make a squiggly line that looked something like a 'A', rather than spend the time trying to wrote out 'Arthur Dent' when a hand clamped down on his shoulder and spun him around.

"I," shouted Zaphod, pointing at himself with one hand, holding Arthur with another, and hefting a large device with lights and wires sticking out of it into the air with a third, "have a bomb!"

Arthur rolled his eyes and wished that he were in one of those ____ places that he didn't know where it was.

The press went crazy. "What's that there?" asked one reporter. "Who are you?" asked another.

"I'm Zaphod Beeblebrox!" said one head. "It's a bomb." said the

other.

“What kind of bomb?”

“A large explodey bomb.”

“Are you planning to detonate this bomb, or have you saved us from it?”

“I plan to detonate it.”

“Where are you going to detonate it?”

“Right here.”

“Is this some sort of statement?”

“Yes. Uh, No.”

“Will you be claiming responsibility for this bombing?” “Are you running for office?” “Who made the bomb?” “Can you tell us when the bomb will go off?” “Who does your wardrobe?”

“Shut up! Shut up! Shut up!” yelled Zaphod. “Now listen, i have a bomb, and i’m going to kill Arthur Dent with it!”

“Who’s Arthur Dent?” asked a particularly slow reporter.

“He’s the President of the Galaxy, you blerky little dimtwit!”

“Has he issued a statement?”

Zaphod screamed and threw his bomb at the reporters. It bounced a couple of times on the floor, shedding wires and various plastic pieces, then came to rest chirping a melody that Arthur thought sounded an awful lot like “It’s a Small World.”

Arthur hardly had time to let the melody get stuck in his head before Zaphod grabbed him and set off for an exit on the other end of the convention hall. They made it about halfway there when there was a flash of light and a small cloud of smoke erupted from the floor in front of them. As the smoke drifted upwards towards the ceiling, Zarniwoop, holding a large shiny device over his head, stepped over the spot where the smoke had erupted from and stood in front of Zaphod and Arthur.

“Stop!” he commanded. “I have a bomb!”

They stopped. Zaphod didn’t look worried though. Of course, Zaphod *never* looked worried, but in this instance he looked even less worried than his normal state of non-worriedness. “That’s not a bomb,” he said calmly. “It’s a toaster.”

"No it isn't!" snapped Zarniwoop. "It's an amazingly powerful bomb and if you don't do what i say, i'll blow everybody up!"

Arthur was quite prepared to believe that the shiny thing in Zarniwoop's hands was a bomb until a piece of toast popped out of slot on the top of it.

"Y'see?" said Zaphod. "It is a toaster!"

"It could be both!" protested Zarniwoop.

"Could be, but isn't," countered Zaphod. "Now if you'll excuse me, i have a primate to do away with." He grabbed Arthur's arm and headed for the door.

"Not before i get what i need out of him!" yelled Zarniwoop, grabbing Arthur's other arm.

"Ooh!" said Zaphod, suddenly interested. "he's got something in him? What is it?" He stepped closer to Arthur and started poking various parts of his body.

"Stop that!" said Arthur, thoroughly annoyed at the entire situation.

"And he talks!" marvelled Zaphod.

"Of course i talk! I've talked for the entire time i've known you!"

"A bit too much, if you ask me" Zaphod said conspiratorily to Zarniwoop.

"Stop talking!" came a voice from the crowd that had once again gathered around them. "I want an exclusive!"

The three of them looked up to see Trillian pushing her way towards them.

"Hiya Trillian!" said Zaphod when she'd reached them. But Trillian ignored him and went straight for Arthur, grabbing him by the collar, as Zaphod and Zarniwoop still had his arms.

"Don't talk, Arthur!" she said. "I promised my editor that you'd give me an exclusive."

"An exclusive what?" said Arthur, beginning to feel that old familiar state of confusion settling in for the long haul.

"Interview, Arthur. You're the President of the Galaxy!"

"Oh, right, yes. About that..."

"Don't talk, Arthur."

“Well it’s just that i don’t understand why i’m the President of the Galaxy all of a sudden.

“You’re famous, Arthur,” said Zaphod.

“Well, yes, i imagine a president would be—”

“I said no talking!” interrupted Trillian.

“He’d better talk,” said Zarniwoop, giving Arthur a bit of a tug.

“No!” said Trillian. “He can’t! I’ve got an exclusive.”

“But he *knows!*” snarled Zarniwoop, beginning to look even more unhinged than he had of late.

“Er, what do i know?” asked Arthur politely.

“Where the Guide is!” snapped Zarniwoop.

“Oh. Yes, well, i do know that.”

“Aha!” yelled Zarniwoop triumphantly. “See? Where is it?”

“Well, it’s right here,” said Arthur. He shook an arm free, reached into his bag, and pulled out his copy of the Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy. Everyone stared at it for a moment.

“Not *a* guide!” yelled Zarniwoop. “*The* Guide! The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy! The headquarters! The big building! The thing that isn’t where it was last and hasn’t shown up where it might be next! *That* Guide! Now where is it?”

“How on Earth would i know?”

“It’s on Earth?” said Zaphod.

“Earth’s been destroyed,” said Trillian. “But it brings up a good point. How would he know?”

“Because he’s the director!” spluttered Zarniwoop. “The head honcho! The big cheese! The guy in charge! The number one executive officer and editor in supreme chief!”

“I am?” said Arthur.

“Don’t play stupid!” yelled Zarniwoop.

“Oh he doesn’t,” said Zaphod. “He just is.”

“Hey!” protested Arthur.

“Look, Arthur,” said Trillian, “is there someplace we can go to have this interview?”

“He’s not going anywhere!” said the head of Zarniwoop and both of Zaphod’s.

"Oh yes he is," said #3, stepping to the front of the crowd.

"He's going with us," said #4 from the other side of the small group.

There was a very small moment where everybody in the circle framed by the crowd observing them looked at everybody else in the circle. The crowd looked at everybody in the circle too, and nobody said anything. It was, all in all, a very peaceful moment.

Then the yelling began.

Chapter 58

“Oi!” yelled Sputty to no one in particular.

“Heeeeeey!” he yelled again, letting the sound bounce around off all of the walls of the buildings of the town he was standing in the middle of.

Fenchurch and Libby stood near him by a crumbling fountain in a crumbling square in what very much looked like a crumbling town on a relatively stable continent in the northern hemisphere of the planet Golgafrincham. #3 and #4 had politely informed them of their location shortly before impolitely leaving them there.

“Hello!” Sputty tried again, using a different but still quite useless tack. “Is anybody there?”

“Geez Louise Sputty,” said Libby, “if there was anybody here, don’tcha think they woulda answered the first time?”

“Can’t be too sure,” said Sputty. He set himself to yell again but stopped when Fenchurch put her hand on his shoulder.

“Don’t bother,” she said. “This town’s deserted. Just like the last one, and the one before that. I think the whole planet’s deserted.”

“Who’d desert an entire planet?” asked Libby.

“Probably someone with someplace better to go,” said Sputty in a moment of uncharacteristic clarity. The moment didn’t last. “You’d think they woulda left a note.”

Chapter 59

The people of Golgafrincham did, in fact, leave a note. The text of the note was “We’re off, i think there’s something under the—”.

Many scholars have advanced many theories as to what the Golgafrinchans were referring to, what it was under, and how it might have wiped them out, or if in fact it had anything to do with wiping them out. No one knows for sure.

What is known is that there were three great Golgafrinchan societies. The first one evolved, thrived, prospered, spread, and advanced to the point of mastering space travel. Very soon after that achievement, a segment of the society was sent off on an (unbeknownst to them) random trajectory toward the unfashionable Western Spiral Arm of the galaxy. This segment of the Golgafrinchan society was referred to by the hard-working uneducated laborers as “the folks who make too much money and don’t work hard enough for it” and by the educated scientific community as “the people whose monetary worth far exceeds their societal worth.”

Once that segment was gone, the first great Golgafrinchan society was wiped out by unclean telephones.

The second great Golgafrinchan society was built up over thousands of years from the scattered remnants of the first great Golgafrinchan society, passing the lessons learned from the ancient ancestors on and instilling in all Golgafrinchans a respect and awe of the tiny tiny things that can kill you. This society again achieved technological advancements and became known throughout their sector of the galaxy for their unparalleled expertise in the microscopic world. The second great Golgafrinchan society was determined not to fall victim to the tiny invaders that wiped out the first Golgafrincham society.

It was ironic then, that a family of Moldoblattians, who were roughly one hundred and sixty times the size of even the largest Golgafrinchan, stopped by Golgafrincham one day for a picnic and

stepped on them all.

This brings us to the third great Golgafrinchan society, born of the scattered few who were known as Those Who Were Not Squashed. This society lived in constant fear of very large things and very small things and oh zark there's all those things in the middle to be afraid of as well. Despite this, the Golgafrinchans managed to multiply, prosper, and once again become a technologically advanced civilization with a disproportionately large number of galactic-champion sprinters. Their prowess in track and field events has been attributed to the fact that Golgafrinchan children spent a great deal of time running quickly away from everything that scared them, which was, basically, everything.

It was all for naught however, as the third great Golgafrinchan society eventually suffered the fate of the first two. The trigger seemed to be when the president of Golgafrincham grew tired of constantly living in fear and set about writing a note to let the people know of his intention to leave. The note remained unfinished and archeologists have determined that the most likely cause of the extinction of the third great Golgafrinchan society was that they all died of fright.

What they died in fright from remains a mystery, although several large volumes have been written about it, full of theories and speculation, most of which involve some sort of pygmy giant hybrid or a super-intelligent vegetable, and most of which have never been read.

Chapter 60

“Arthur!” yelled someone.

“Arthur!” yelled someone else.

“Arthur! Arthur! Arthur!” yelled some more people.

Arthur was not enjoying this. Zaphod, Trillian, Zarniwoop, #3, and #4 were all yelling, shoving, and yanking Arthur about in all directions. The crowd was alternately cheering and booing as if this was some sporting event and while he was being tossed about like whatever ball this sporting event used, Arthur managed to register that it seemed like the crowd was being incited by someone and it seemed like that someone was Ford.

Ford was, in fact, doing a brisk business laying odds for and against each interested party vying for Arthur and was taking all bets, which he had no intention of paying off. Arthur was particularly troubled that there seemed to be a sideline bet on whether he'd remain in one piece or not.

“Now look here—” started Arthur before he was jerked off in another direction.

“I really think that— If you don’t mind— Now really— Can i just say—”

“Stop it!” he finally yelled, tearing himself away from whoever happened to be holding on to him at the moment. There was an “oooooh!” from the crowd and all five of the people vying for the title of sole Arthur-napper became quiet.

The quiet lasted for about as long as a very short sneeze before everyone started yelling again and there was a renewed surge of betting going on in the crowd. For some reason, Arthur thought back to a time when he was lying in mud in an attempt to stop a large bulldozer from demolishing his house. At the time, it seemed that there was probably no worse position to be in, yet since then he'd been in quite a few worse positions, and for sheer annoyance factor, this one ranked right up there near the top of the list of the worst positions to be in.

Although he had to admit that at least he was standing up.

Trillian had a death-grip on one arm and was trying to pull Arthur away through the crowd. Zaphod was using all three of his arms to try to strangle Arthur but wasn't having much luck as Zarniwoop kept shoving him away while he continually screamed at everyone to just shut up so that he could ask Arthur some questions. #3 and #4 kept shooting each other and popping up right next to Arthur before being elbowed or kicked by Zaphod, Zarniwoop, or Trillian. And Arthur was spending his time trying to stay vertical amid the growing piles of #3s and #4s.

The verticality task was soon made more difficult due to the fact that the floor started shuddering, and the shuddering was growing stronger, and a lot of the yelling of the crowd shifted to screaming. Of course, the screaming wasn't making it hard to stand, unless you happened to be standing a bit away from where Arthur was standing. If that was the case, you might have been trampled by the crowds running madly away from the place where Arthur was standing. This was because, approaching that spot with heavy shuddering steps, was a giant death robot.

The robot clanked to a stop, towering over the clutch of people clutching Arthur and in a booming metallic voice yelled "STOP!"

Miraculously, the people who were not running in terror (or in the case of Ford, running from the creditors he had no intention of paying), which was Arthur, Zaphod, Trillian, Zarniwoop, #3, and #4, all actually stopped what they were doing and gaped at the robot towering over them.

There were a couple of flashes of light and Trillian and Zaphod went sprawling across the convention hall floor, stunned. A Constrict-O-Net shot out of a port on one of the robot's massive arms and took down Zarniwoop. #3 and #4 didn't wait for what was next and quickly shot each other, leaving Arthur face-to-waist with the terrifying metal monster.

One of the hulking arms of the robot reached out and dangled what looked like a dog's lead with a collar attached to it in front of Arthur's face. The other arm reached up and tapped a button on the

chest of the robot. A small plate slid open and a face looked out at Arthur. It was a familiar face and Arthur now understood why the robot was holding what it was holding.

“Dimpie!” squealed Nodwedge from the robotic exoskeleton that she was in. “You’ve been very naughty! I’ve been looking for you *everywhere!* Mustn’t run away! Bad, Dimpie! Bad!”

When one is told by a crazy person in a giant armored robotic exoskeleton with enough weapons on it to blow up a small moon not to run away, a normal sane person would make it a point to not run away. Arthur had, since leaving Earth, never felt normal, and at the moment he wasn’t so keen on sane either. He ran away.

Chapter 61

The Kookaburra kicked the dirt outside the large hangar she was standing next to. She didn't like dirt. She was born in space and grew up in space and would much rather be in space than on a deserted planet that seemed to have an overabundance of dirt but no working spacecraft. There were bits and pieces of outdated spaceships in the hangars of the spaceport that she was standing in the middle of, but not a single working ship. Wherever these Golgafrinchans had gone, they must have taken every available ship to get there.

She pulled out her Sub-etha Sens-o-matic and flipped it on. Nothing. She turned it off and kicked the dirt again, sending some pebbles clanging against the side of the hangar. The sound echoed around the empty spaceport, making her feel even more alone than usual.

But she didn't feel alone. Wherever she went, she felt like she was being watched—like someone or something was tracking her every move. It didn't feel eerie or hostile, just like someone was keeping tabs on her, observing. She didn't like it almost as much as she didn't like the dirt. She felt like she was in a zoo, on display for some anonymous person's amusement, like a pet in a planet-sized cage.

She made a rude gesture at the sky, and set off away from the spaceport.

Chapter 62

Arthur was not happy. He was crouched next to the robotic exoskeleton with a collar around his neck. There was a lead attached to the collar, the other end of which was being held by Nodwedge, who was holding a press conference explaining that this was *not* Arthur Dent who was obediently crouched next to her (he'd already been shocked a half-dozen times so he wasn't putting up much of an argument), but it was in fact, her pet, Dimpie, a very rare bipedal simian tmik-tmik which she claimed to have rescued from a ravenous bug-blatter beast on the fourteenth moon of Klubble 2. She had relieved Arthur of the trenchcoat that he'd taken from the body of either #3 or #4 (he couldn't tell which) but had decided that he could keep the hat.

The press, of course, couldn't be bothered to question her version of reality, and were gamely asking her about the weather on the fourteenth moon of Klubble 2 and what Dimpie preferred to eat.

Arthur crouched there, wondering why, if he was the President of the Galaxy—which he apparently was—he couldn't simply buy back his freedom. He wondered what perks the President got and hoped that one of them might be an unlimited charge card. He wondered how the President got paid and where he could pick up his paycheck. Then he wondered if he should just go insane for a while.

Fortunately, he was spared a lifetime of voluntary insanity by a familiar voice. He looked up to see Ford Prefect working his way through the clump of reporters toward Nodwedge. The reporters were grudgingly shuffling out of the way for Ford, who was being tugged forward by a dog at the end of a lead.

"Miss Nodwedge! Miss Nodwedge!" called out Ford as he approached her. "I'm on my way to the all-galactic pet show on Stavromula Beta. Will you be entering your... uh, whatever thingy?" He pointed at Arthur.

"Dimpie is a very rare bipedal simian..." she trailed off as Rutlow, on the end of Ford's lead, started sniffing Arthur. "Er, does your dog

bite?" she asked.

"Only when he's hungry," said Ford.

"Oh. Er, is he hungry now?" she asked, nervously looking at Rutlow, who by this time had stuck his nose right in Arthur's face.

Rutlow and Arthur eyed each other. "We're going to have a fight," growled Rutlow softly to Arthur. "When I say run, run." He winked at Arthur then bared his teeth menacingly. Arthur nodded slightly and glanced up at Nodwedge, who held the end of his lead tightly in her hand, finger hovering over the shock button. In her other hand, she clenched the remote control for the robotic exoskeleton. He braced himself for the worst.

Ford was telling Nodwedge about the fabulous cash prize given out for 'most exotic pet' when Rutlow lunged at Arthur, tipping him over backwards. Nodwedge screamed. Ford dropped his end of the lead and pulled something out of his bag. Arthur tried very hard not to laugh, as Rutlow was not only pawing at his midsection in a way that was very ticklish, he was, instead of barking at Arthur, simply yelling "Bark bark bark bark!" at him.

It didn't last long though. Ford jabbed the thing he was holding into Nodwedge's midsection and she collapsed with a spasm that gave Arthur a short jolt from his collar and cause the robotic exoskeleton to blast a large hole in the opposite wall.

"Run!" said Rutlow, and for what seemed like the tenth time in much too short of a time, Arthur ran.

Rutlow led the way, with Arthur and Ford trailing behind. They dashed down corridors, across convention halls, and through some small rooms and hallways that were most likely off limits to the general public, but Rutlow seemed to know where he was going. He had to stop a few times to let Arthur and Ford catch up, as his four legs were carrying him quite a bit faster than the four combined legs of the bipeds, but soon he darted into a spaceport entry tube and came to a stop inside the spaceship at the end of it. Ford dashed straight to the controls while Rutlow closed the door and disengaged the docking latches. Arthur stood in the entryway of the ship, catching his breath.

"Where to?" said Ford from around the corner from where

Arthur stood.

"Oh, anywhere's fine," came another voice.

"Anywhere it is!" said Ford, and the ship slid away from the docking station of Spacon 1.

Arthur stepped out of the entryway and into the main quarters of the ship and he instantly felt at ease. He was on the Machina X and there was God, sitting at a table with a plate of crackers and cheese. Rutlow was settling down at his feet.

"Tea?" said God, offering Arthur a cup.

Arthur was happy and confused and amazed all at once. He sat down across from God and had a delicious cup of tea while God and Rutlow talked about the latest ballgy match and Ford whistled an obscene tune while piloting the craft off to anywhere.

Chapter 63

"Anywhere," said Sputty, with the assurance of someone who has no idea what he's talking about but thinks he does.

"Anywhere?" said Fenchurch. "In the whole Universe?"

"Could be," said Sputty.

"No," said Fenchurch, "I think we're still in the Milky Way galaxy, and probably close to Earth, or at least, where Earth used to be."

"How ya figger?"

"I've heard of Golgafrincham," said Fenchurch. "I think Arthur told me. I think they visited Earth a long time in the past. And just look around. It's very Earth-like."

Sputty looked around at the various buildings in the village that they were standing in. "Yeah, but they're just houses, y'know?" he said, scrunching up his face and thinking. "They're all basically square 'cause it's too much trouble to make a round one."

He picked up a rock and threw it at one of the houses. It sailed wide and clattered out of sight between the house and the one next to it. Fenchurch, Sputty, and Libby stood in silence in the overgrown street in the deserted village for a moment, until the rock that Sputty had just thrown came arcing through the air toward them and landed in the dirt at their feet.

"Whizzer!" said Sputty. "Magic rocks!"

"Oh, please," said Libby. She walked toward the gap between the houses where the rock had come from. "Hello?" she called out. "Is anybody there?"

"No," a voice called back.

"Double whizzer!" said Sputty. "Disembodied voices!"

"If there's nobody there," called out Libby, "who am I talking to?"

"I didn't say it was nobody," said the Kookaburra, stepping out from behind the side of the house. "I said it wasn't anybody."

"And you're definitely not just anybody!" said Libby, running over

to give the Kookaburra a hug, which she stiffly accepted.

“How did you get here?” asked Fenchurch.

“Dunno,” said the Kookaburra. “I got in the Vortex, felt weird, ended up here with two stupid and annoying men.”

“Trench coats?” said Libby. “And hats?”

“Yeah...”

“Same fellas left us here.”

“Wait, *left* you here?” said the Kookaburra, looking hard at all of them. “You mean you don’t have the ship?”

“The ship?” said Sputty. “Ooh, the ship, hmm...”

“Well?”

“Er, no. Not really.”

“Not really?”

“Not at all. Really.” Sputty looked at the ground while the Kookaburra put her hand to her head to sort out the situation.

“It’s her fault,” offered Sputty, pointing at Fenchurch.

“My fault?” protested Fenchurch. “How is it my fault?”

“You’re from Earth.”

“So are you!”

“Well, you admitted it.”

“You’re the one who admitted it!”

“Oh yeah, i guess i did.” said Sputty, thinking about it. “Well, someone had to.”

“Someone did *not* have—”

“Enough!” shouted the Kookaburra, silencing the argument. She looked around at them all. “OK, we’re stuck here without a ship, the Sub-etha Sens-O-Matic’s not picking up anything, and it’ll be night soon. There’s plenty of shelter—”she gestured at the village surrounding them—“so we just need to find whatever preserved food the Golgafrinchans might’ve left behind. Get looking. Let’s just hope they didn’t take everything when they took their spaceships.

She set off moodily down the street, the other three scattered out behind her.

Chapter 64

Arthur decided that he was in a good mood. He was not being chased, choked, shocked, or shot at, and he'd just had a very nice cup of tea.

"I'm just going to visit the loo," he said to no one in particular. God appeared to be napping in the chair opposite Arthur and both Ford and Rutlow were curled up on the floor asleep. "Right," he said, standing up.

"Don't forget your hat," said God, his eyes still closed.

"I'm sorry?" said Arthur.

"Your hat," said God, nodding at the black hat which Arthur had placed on the table while he was drinking his tea.

"I'm just going to the loo."

"Never know when you'll need your hat."

"Yes, but..." Arthur tried to think of a good reason why one wouldn't need a hat to go to the loo, but couldn't think of one because why would you ever need to explain to someone why a hat is unnecessary for a trip to the loo? It's just something that would never come up, Arthur thought to himself.

"Just put on the hat, Arthur," said Rutlow from the floor. His eyes were closed and he was pawing the floor a bit as if he was dreaming.

Arthur thought that they were both daft or perhaps sharing some sort of symbiotic dream, but he nevertheless picked up the black hat and put it on, mostly so he wouldn't have to keep trying to think of a reason not to.

He hadn't visited the toilet facilities on the Machina X the last time he'd been on it and was surprised at how rustic it looked inside. The walls were rough-sawn boards and the tiny room almost had the feel of an outhouse, except that it was in a spaceship. He was relieved that the toilet itself was very much like a toilet one would find on Earth and that lifted his spirits up from the odd state they'd just been in from the strange conversation about hats that he'd just had. He

noticed a small plaque on the wall next to the toilet that said “Portal Potty - Yab Neerg, Nocnew 7.” Arthur thought that that was a funny name for a spaceship loo but didn’t give it much thought until he was done with his business and stepped out of the Portal Potty.

Where Arthur stepped out to was what made Arthur reconsider the humor in the name on the plaque as it was *not* the interior of the Machina X, but a beautiful rocky beach on a gloriously sunny day. Arthur gaped at the scene, then looked back at the loo. The interior looked exactly as it had a moment before, with its faux-outhouse decor, but now the exterior was, with no faux about it, an outhouse. He stepped back inside, closed the door, and waited for what he thought was an appropriate amount of time. Then he opened the door again. The same scene spread out before him—a gentle surf lapped on the shoreline, birds wheeled in the ocean breeze, and the sun dazzled off the rocks and sea.

Arthur shut the door again and pondered what to do. He flushed the toilet and watched the water drain out and fill back up, then he checked the door again. He was still at the beach. He sighed and stepped out of the outhouse to look about. A short distance away, just into the gently rolling hills that extended away from the beach, was a dilapidated old shack. It was the only structure around except for the outhouse. Arthur headed towards it, hoping that there might be someone in it, and if so, that they could tell him how to work the Portal Potty in reverse.

As he approached the shack, the door creaked open. A cat sat just inside, looking at Arthur.

“Er, hello,” said Arthur to the cat. The cat blinked, but said nothing, as cats are generally apt to do. “Is this your house?”

The cat shook its head, then nodded, then licked its paw. Arthur tried to make sense of that, but was stumped.

“Um,” he began, but he couldn’t think of what to say to a cat, mostly because he wasn’t even sure if what he was trying to converse with was a hyper-intelligent talking cat who lived in this shack by the beach, or if it was just a cat. As if to answer this question, the cat stepped out of the shack onto the rickety porch, found a comfortable

spot, and lay down in the sun.

"So i guess you're just a cat," said Arthur, feeling foolish.

"Am i?" said a voice. Arthur looked up to see an old man standing in the doorway of the shack wearing half a jumper. "Then are you a cat too?"

"No," said Arthur, trying not to look as embarrassed as he felt. "My name is Arthur Dent. I seem to have gotten stuck here."

"Perhaps if you'd lift a foot off the ground, you'd find that you weren't stuck," said the man. He pulled a bit of thread away from the jumper and seemed delighted to watch it unravel.

"No," said Arthur again, taking a step sideways to demonstrate his non-stuckness, "i came here through the Portal Potty thing over there and i can't seem to make it work again."

"I don't know anything about that," said the man. "Would you like some tea?" He turned around and went into his shack. Arthur sighed and followed him in. He was disappointed that the man didn't know how to use the Portal Potty, but he was happy to be offered his second spot of tea, which was two more times than he'd been offered since, well, he couldn't remember when.

The shack was simple, but comfortable. There were two cups of tea and some biscuits on the plain wooden table. The old man had sat down and was pulling more thread from the jumper. Arthur sat down and picked up his cup. "Cheers!" he said.

"Are there?" said the old man. "Perhaps i didn't hear them. But i like that word. It's a happy word."

They both took a sip of tea. Arthur was delighted to find that the tea, like the last cup he'd had, was excellent. "Good tea," he said.

"It's as good as The Lord will allow," said the old man. "He's the one who tells me what leaves to pick. Have you met him? He's sunning himself on the porch."

Arthur looked out onto the porch, then back at the old man. "The cat?" he said, confused.

"Is he a cat?" said the old man. "Then we must not be cats. That explains a lot." He hummed to himself and continued to sip his tea. Arthur, seeing that no explanation of that statement was forthcoming,

drank his tea.

“So,” said Arthur, when both cups were drained, “is there a town or village nearby?”

“I’ve never seen a town,” said the old man, smiling. “I may have seen a village once.”

“Er, nearby?”

“Perhaps... but probably not.”

“Well, could you at least tell me what planet this is?”

“Perhaps... but probably not.”

“Don’t you know?”

“I know some things,” said the old man, standing up and walking toward the door. “And i don’t know some things. I’ve often wondered what the difference is.” He got to the door and held his arms out as if motioning for Arthur to leave. “Goodbye,” he said. “I think that it’s been nice to have met you, Arthur Dent.”

Arthur stood up and walked to the door. The man stood there, smiling and holding his hands out towards the outside. Arthur looked out and was surprised to see nine men and women standing in a small arc in front of the shack, facing him. They were all tall with athletic builds and close-cropped hair and each one was wearing different combinations of bright colors—some stripes, some checks, some just large blocks of color. They looked, to Arthur, to be basically human except that they all had very large and very white hands which didn’t seem to match the color of the skin on their faces. They stood there with their wide flat fingers dangling down by their knees. The woman in the middle, wearing diagonal stripes of gold and turquoise, stepped forward,

“Arthur Dent?” she said.

“Yes?” said Arthur, shuffling forward to the edge of the porch.

“My name is Barnexa. This is Barnew, Barnita, Barnisub, Barnoox, Barnoline, Barnette, and Barn-barn.” She gestured to each one as she said his or her name and each waved a giant white hand at Arthur in return.

“Er, hi,” said Arthur, feebly waving back.

“Drink this,” said Barnexa, holding out a sports water bottle.

Arthur stepped off the porch nervously and took the bottle.

“What is it?” he asked.

“Nutrients,” said Barnexa. “Tailored to your specific intake needs. Please drink it all.”

Arthur wasn’t keen on drinking something that he didn’t know what it was, but he somehow got the sense that these people were here to protect him, not hurt him, so he took a sip. It was sweet and pure like spring water, with just a hint of fruit juice. Even though he’d just had a full cup of tea, he found it surprisingly easy to drink it all.

“Now,” said Barnexa, taking the empty water bottle back from Arthur, “do you have any questions before we continue?”

“Continue to where?”

Barnexa looked at him in surprise. “Your new home. Didn’t the agents tell you?”

“I told you,” said Barnow to Barnexa. “Crafty but unreliable.”

“But they did get the job done,” said Barnoline. “He’s got one of their hats.”

“#3 and #4?” said Arthur, touching the black hat on his head.

“Yes,” said Barnexa. “We sent them in search of you quite a while ago, but even just searching in one galaxy can take some time. We’re just happy that we’ve finally managed to locate you.”

Arthur couldn’t understand why so many different people all seemed to be looking for him. He suddenly had a thousand questions to ask and he couldn’t decide what to ask first. “Who are you?” he finally settled on.

“We’re the Keepers,” said Barnexa. “We preserve those things that might otherwise disappear.”

“And what do you want with me?”

“You’re a very rare specimen, Arthur Dent. Your species is nearly extinct. We’ve had you on our endangered list for some time.”

“Endangered?”

“We were a bit worried that your presidency might preclude you from our sanctuary plans, but thankfully, that’s been taken care of.”

“Presidency?”

Barnexa paused and looked at Arthur, who stood there looking

confused. "Are you feeling OK?" she asked.

Arthur was, in fact, feeling quite OK. It must have been the nutrients he'd just had, as he was feeling energetic and lucid and healthy, but he still didn't know what was going on.

"All right, questions," he said. "First, why am I the President of the Galaxy?"

"That's the part he missed," said Barnita.

"Yes," said Barnexa. "You disappeared out of the Universe for a bit. It was during that time that everyone agreed that it was wasting too much time and money to run for President of the Galaxy, so they decided to just make the most famous person in the galaxy the President."

"Really made it easier on everyone," said Barn-barn.

"So why was I the most famous person in the galaxy?" asked Arthur.

"Because you killed a tmik-tmik," said Barnexa. "Several of them."

"But that wasn't hard at all."

"That's because you weren't trying. Everyone else who tries to kill a tmik-tmik is actually trying. You didn't try, so you succeeded."

"That doesn't make sense."

"The Universe doesn't make sense."

"But still, just killing a small animal?"

"Don't forget, you were also the head of the Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy," said Barnexa.

"And you were kidnapped by a robot," said Barnoline.

"That was Ford!" protested Arthur.

"Still made the news," said Barnoline.

"And how did I get to be head of the Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy?"

"Ah," said Barnita. "We think that was just a ruse to keep Zarniwoop away from Dr. Fonkenopolous."

"Is that why Zarniwoop was after me?"

"It appears so."

"Why was Zaphod after me?"

“To become President of the Galaxy.”

“What?”

“The President of the Galaxy is the most famous person in the galaxy,” said Barnow. “And if you kill the most famous person in the galaxy, then *you’re* the most famous person in the galaxy.”

“And hence, the President,” said Barnexa.

“But i don’t want to be President of the Galaxy!”

“Good,” said Barnexa, “because you’re not.”

“I thought i was.”

“You *were*. Some pop singer in a survival dance competition gave birth to dodecatuplets. Now *she’s* the President of the Galaxy.”

Arthur stood there trying to make sense of it all.

“Any more questions?” asked Barnexa.

Arthur did have some more questions. He had a lot of them, but he was suddenly aware that the large volume of liquids he’d recently consumed was having an effect that required immediate attention. “Yes, actually,” he said to Barnexa, “but if you’ll excuse me for just a moment, i’ve got to pop off to the loo. Terribly sorry.”

The Keepers stood aside and Arthur hurried to the outhouse, his mind awash with things to ask the Keepers, who seemed to know an awful lot. When he was done relieving himself, he flushed the toilet and stepped out of the outhouse into the narrow hallway of the Machina X. He closed the door and opened it again, but he was still in the spaceship, and all he could think was that he’d forgotten to thank the batty old man for the cup of tea.

Chapter 65

"I could go for a spot of tea," said Fenchurch.

"I could go for a spot of anything," said Sputty

Fenchurch, Sputty, Libby, and the Kookaburra were all sitting around a campfire that they'd built in a small park in an empty village. The hunt for food had not gone well and they were all tired and hungry. The Kookaburra was being moodier than usual. Sputty was, except for the comment about food, being uncharacteristically quiet. Libby was nodding off. And Fenchurch was staring into the fire, lost in thought. She thought a lot about the Golgafrinchans and where they might have gone. The thought about Earth and what might be going on there if there was still an Earth for things to go on on. She thought about jobs and banks and flying through space and strange alien creatures. And then she thought about Arthur Dent and whether they'd ever find him and if she'd ever see him again. She decided that if she did see him again, she should make a point of staying wherever he was. He seemed like the kind of man that she'd enjoy being with, and it was probably worth it to stick around people like that. She watched glowing embers drift up away from the fire and blend in with the stars and she wondered where in that field of little pricks of light Arthur was.

Chapter 66

Arthur stepped into the main cabin of the Machina X. Everyone was asleep—Rutlow and Ford on the floor, God still in his chair, breathing lightly. Arthur cleared his throat politely. It was a bit too politely, as no one stirred. He cleared it again with a bit more force.

“Something stuck in your throat, meat man?” came a voice from somewhere.

“Er, hello?” said Arthur, looking around.

“Oh, why do i even bother?” said Lucifer. “Two grunts, two words, and you haven’t said anything. Haven’t you ever heard of a morpheme?”

“A what?”

“There you go. There’s one. Brilliant. Only took you two syllables.”

Arthur tried to remember what a morpheme was but wasn’t coming up with anything other than it had something to do with language. “Listen, i—”

“I’d rather not.” interrupted Lucifer.

“Fine then, don’t.” mumbled Arthur to himself. He plunked himself down at the command console and looked out at the stars. The thing about stars, Arthur had determined, was that there was no way to tell which was which. If he was travelling in an airplane, he could look down and recognize towns and cities, roads, lakes, oceans... But in space, all the stars looked the same—little specks of light—and there was no way to tell where you were or if that star over there had a giant advanced civilization around it or nothing at all. It was all very humbling and mysterious.

“Did you have a nice trip?” came Rutlow’s voice from the floor. Arthur swiveled his chair around. Rutlow was stretching out his front paws.

“Trip?” Arthur echoed.

“You were gone a while,” said Rutlow. “Figured you must have

taken a trip somewhere.”

“Do you know how that loo works?”

“I know that you have to use it for it to work. Godlibang could tell you more.”

“Who?”

“Godlibang,” said Rutlow, nodding at the white-haired man sleeping in the chair. “Goes by God sometimes. ’Course that’s easier to remember i suppose. But his full name is Godlibangottott Nuckingfuff.”

“Oh,” said Arthur, not sure what to make of that. He looked back out at the stars. “Where are we going?” he asked.

“Out near the Western Spiral Arm i think.”

“Oh. Who’s piloting us?”

“Lucifer.”

“Aren’t you worried that he might try to fly us into a star or something?”

The ship shifted course slightly.

“Lucifer,” said Rutlow, “don’t fly us into a star.”

The ship shifted back to it’s previous course.

“Rutlow, do you know who the Keepers are?”

“Heard of them. Never met any, why?”

“Well, i just met some of them—maybe all of them, i don’t know how many there are—and they said that they were going to take me to a new home.”

“But they didn’t?”

“Well, no, they seem to have let me come back here. And we’re traveling by the Western Spiral Arm of the galaxy, right?”

“Yep.”

“Wasn’t Earth in the Western Spiral Arm?”

“It was.”

“And it definitely isn’t anymore?”

“As far as i know.”

Arthur sat and thought for a while. “How do we know that when we make decisions we’re doing what we want to do and not doing what someone has manipulated us into thinking that we want to do?”

"We don't," said Rutlow. "But if we spent all our time second guessing every decision we made, no one would get anything done.

"I guess so," said Arthur. "Still, it's something to do."

Chapter 67

"I need something to *do*," complained the Kookaburra. She was pacing around the dead campfire while the others were rummaging through the remnants of the few tins of food that they'd found. After a few circuits of the fire she stopped and looked off into the woods. "I'm going to find something that shoots and then find something to shoot and shoot it with the thing i've found to shoot with." She stomped off through the town.

Fenchurch watched her go. "She's not really in her element here, is she?"

"Nah," said Sputty. "She likes to stay on the move. Doesn't like being stuck someplace too long. Rather be on a spaceship... like that one."

Fenchurch and Libby looked up to where Sputty was pointing. A small spaceship was descending through the sky in gradual circles. As it got nearer, it sailed almost directly over them, then settled down to the ground just outside the village. Fenchurch, Libby, and Sputty immediately set off for its landing spot.

Arthur wasn't sure why they were stopping at this planet. God had been very vague with answers. But as they spiraled down over villages and fields, Arthur thought that it reminded him very much of the English countryside.

The ship touched down lightly. Arthur unlatched the door and as soon as he had it open, Rutlow bounded out into the tall grass, stretched, then shook himself vigorously. Arthur followed him out and looked around. It was a beautiful day, the air smelled warm and clean, the sun was shining, and he even thought that, amid the buzzing and chirps of insects and birds, he could hear his name being called, as if the planet was welcoming him, as if he belonged here.

Fenchurch, Sputty, and Libby stopped on the edge of the field and surveyed the scene. A spaceship had landed and a few people and a dog had come out of it. Fenchurch couldn't believe her eyes. There, next to the dog, with his head tilted up to the sky, was Arthur Dent.

"Arthur!" she called out. He didn't seem to hear her. "Arthur!" she called again, then started running towards him.

Arthur was sure he'd heard it that time—it couldn't have been insects or a trick of the wind. He looked towards the sound and his jaw dropped. There, running through the tall grass as if in slow-motion, was Fenchurch. He was momentarily stunned and found himself rooted to the spot, unable to believe what he was seeing, but then his brain said "yes, you dummy, it's her!" and he set off towards her as she approached.

They ran to each other through the tall grass like some horribly cheesy black and white Hollywood movie, and when they reached each other it was awkward and clumsy and goofy but finally they embraced and held on to each other for longer than each thought the other would allow, but they both stayed in the embrace, holding tight, not saying anything, letting the span of time they'd each spent hoping to find the other melt away until it didn't matter anymore. All that mattered was that they were there now, in that grass on that field near that village on the planet Golgafrincham. And Arthur realized that in all the confusion and chases and running around that he'd done, he hadn't had a chance to try to find Fenchurch, but here she was. Perhaps Barnexa was right—it's all in not trying.

Eventually they pulled themselves apart. Everyone else had slowly made their way to where Fenchurch and Arthur stood, and there were introductions all around. Libby was quite taken with Rutlow and couldn't resist scratching his ears, which Rutlow insisted wasn't at all necessary but he appreciated it nonetheless.

"Oh!" said Fenchurch, looking around. "Where's the Kookaburra?"

"Krikey, yeah." said Sputty, turning to Ford and God. "You'll hafta meet the boss. She'll be keen on that spaceship of yours, mate."

"Now you're sure she's really here this time?" said Ford. "Cause

last time you said she was and she wasn't."

"Oh yeah," assured Sputty. "She's around here. Went off to shoot something i reckon. Don't know what. Probably back in the town. The Kookaburra, that is, not the thing she's shot. Although if she's shot something, that's probably back in the town too."

They all walked into the town square where they'd had the campfire the night before. Fenchurch and Arthur were tripping over each other's sentences as they related their lives since they'd last seen each other.

"Wait," said Arthur as they arrived in the square. "The Kookaburra was looking for me too? I wonder why that was?"

"I'm not sure why," said Fenchurch, "but she seemed very keen on it."

"It's 'cause you're famous, kid," said Ford. "Everyone wants a piece of you."

"Yes, and they all were nearly able to go their separate ways, each with a piece of me," said Arthur. "I'd just as soon not have to spare a limb to this Kookaburra either."

"Well, when she gets here, we'll sort it out," said Fenchurch, giving Arthur a little squeeze. "Oh!" she added, "there she is now!"

The Kookaburra had come around a corner into the square and she approached the others, then stopped a short way off. She didn't look like the bold, confident woman that she usually looked like now. She looked a touch meeker, almost humble, standing in the street, and for the second time in less than an hour, Arthur Dent stood in shock.

"Arthur," said Fenchurch, "i'd like you to meet—"

"Random," said Arthur.

Fenchurch looked at him. "Random?" she asked. Then she looked back at the Kookaburra, who was standing still, looking almost embarrassed.

"Hi dad," she said.

Chapter 68

The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy is a wholly remarkable book. If one were to look up the Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy in the Guide itself, one would find all manner of information about the Guide in its present form, as well as a history of the Guide. Clever users know that if they access the history of the Guide, it's possible to access previous versions of the Guide. For instance, you could look through the Guide as it was on the day that you were born, or as it was the day before that supernova wiped out that planet with the really great hot tub restaurant, or even as it was in its infancy when it was mostly a collection of recipes involving canned beans.

If you were really clever, you could access the Guide as it was in its singular multi-dimensional form which spanned a very short infinite amount of time that may or may not have happened. This version is known by the power users of the Guide (who call themselves, unimaginatively 'Guides', but who are known to actual hitchhikers as 'Guidiots') as the Black Phoenix Version.

The Black Phoenix Version of the Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy is the only version that contains more information about a medium-sized blue-green planet circling a yellow star in Sector ZZ9-Plural-Z-Alpha called by its inhabitants, unimaginatively, 'Earth', than the word "harmless" (in Guide versions previous to Black Phoenix) or "Mostly harmless" (in all Guides since). It contains all of the scads of information supplied by one of the Guide's star reporters, Ford Prefect, and should you ever need to find the best rickshaw driver in Shanghai or how to barter for a meal in Duluth, this would be the place to look.

Of course, the Earth doesn't exist anymore, so looking up any of that would be totally pointless. But there is one bit of information buried in the dry statistical data about this expunged planet that remains relevant, even after the demise of Shanghai, Duluth, and everything in between. It is this: The number of Earthlings believed to still be in existence (not including non-native offspring) is fourteen.

Chapter 69

A small group of people stood in silence on an otherwise empty street in an empty village on an empty planet. It was the kind of silence that comes along when there's too much information to process and everyone's brains are busy processing that information and not bothering to send any signals to the muscles that are required for making sounds. Or, if some signals do manage to get through, the sounds that might be emitted are usually akin to sounds that might be made by a much earlier ancestor who lived in a time before the invention of language.

The sounds coming out of Arthur's mouth were very much in the pre-verbal camp—generally in the “wha”, “huh”, and “bbb...” genre. But he soon managed to form actual words like “what?” and “how?” at about the same time that everyone else started to speak.

“He’s your dad?” said Sputty.

“She’s your daughter?” said Fenchurch.

“Hey look Arthur! It’s your kid!” said Ford. “She’s the Kookaburra! Hoopy!”

“Random!” said Arthur again, managing to pull off another two-syllable word.

“Yes, dad, it’s me.” said Random.

“Your name’s Random?” said Libby.

“Yeah,” said Random. “It’s kind of an in-joke.”

“Er, her mother named her,” said Arthur.

“I like it,” said Sputty. “It’s got a kind of... randomness to it.”

“What are you doing here?” said Arthur. “How did you get here? Why are you...”

“Alive?” suggested Random.

“Well, yes.”

“Dunno. We were at the bar, everything went black, and i woke up on a beach.”

“A beach?” said Arthur. “Was there a batty old man with a cat

there? And an outhouse?”

“Uh, no. Why?”

“Um... no reason.”

Random gave him a questioning look, then continued. “So i found a job on a freighter and kicked around for a while, learned some stuff, then found these Ozzies here and started making a name for myself.”

“I gave her that name,” said Libby.

“So now you’re a... a...” Arthur searched for an occupation.

“She’s an intergalactic criminal, Arthur,” said Ford. “How cool is that?”

“It’s not cool at all!” said Arthur. “She’s my daughter! She can’t be a criminal!”

“Can and am,” asserted Random.

“Not if i have something to say about it!”

“You don’t. I’m all grown up now.”

“You’re n— How can that—” Arthur paused and took a good look at Random She actually didn’t seem like the teenager he remembered anymore and she did, in fact, look rather grown up. “How old are you?”

Random shrugged. “I don’t know.”

“What do you mean you don’t know?”

“Well how old are you?”

Arthur opened his mouth to respond, but then realized that he couldn’t come up with a number. “I’m, uh... I don’t know.”

“See?”

“Well, how old are you, Ford?” said Arthur, looking at Ford. Ford shrugged.

“About a third,” he said.

“A third?” echoed Arthur. “A third of what?”

Ford held his arms outstretched out to either side of him. “If i’m going to live this long,” he said, then he moved his arms in to about a third of the previous width, “i’ve lived about this much of it.”

Everyone agreed that that made sense and since no one else had any surprise introductions to make, they all decided to have some lunch.

It was an odd day. Arthur was torn between wanting to spend time alone with Fenchurch and wanting to find out what Random had been doing since they last saw each other, all while feeling obligated to be social with everyone else. Eventually though, as the day wore on, things sorted themselves out. Random was being much as Arthur remembered her, which was a little surly and not keen on giving out much information. God seemed in no hurry to go anywhere and was sitting in a folding chair in the field by his spaceship, enjoying the sunshine. This seemed particularly bothersome to Random, who would have liked to have put the Machina X into more use than being a modern sculpture in an overgrown field.

Ford, Libby, Sputty, and Rutlow were wandering around the town coming up with sociological theories about the Golgafrinchans based on the remnants they found in various bedrooms and coffee shops.

This left Arthur and Fenchurch with nothing else to do but walk through the fields around the town and talk, something that Arthur was more than happy to do. He was delighted to discover that Fenchurch was more than happy to do that as well.

So aside from Random sullenly stomping by every now and then, it was a fabulous afternoon where no one was shot, kidnapped, or presented with their lifetime achievement in waste production.

Chapter 70

Zaphod Beeblebrox lay in a multi-armed multi-headed heap on the smooth floor of Convention Hall Gamma 634. If one weren't familiar with the particular body characteristics of Mr. Beeblebrox, one might think that there was more than one body in that heap and one might wonder what they were up to. The person standing above the heap wasn't unfamiliar with this particular body and didn't hesitate to give it a swift kick, prompting all four eyes to snap open, one head to exclaim "am i famous yet?" and the other to ask "when's lunch?"

Trillian prodded the body again with her shoe in a way that was much closer to a kick than a prod but probably wouldn't hold up in court as such. "get up," she said.

Zaphod looked around, which took only half the time it would've taken anyone else to look around owing to the fact that he had two heads. The time saved was used to get up before Trillian decided to forcefully prod him again with her shoe. "Where's the monkey man?" said Zaphod, using his bobbing head to scan around above the scattered crowds in the convention hall.

"Gone," said Trillian.

"Belgium!" said Zaphod.

"Probably not," said Trillian. She walked over to where Zarniwoop was trying to worm his way out of the Constrict-O-Netting which was, true to its name, constricting around him more as he struggled against it.

"Get me out," he growled at Trillian, glaring at her as best he could from his entangled position.

"Hmmm..." said Trillian, scratching her chin. "What do you think, Zaphod?"

"I try not to," said Zaphod, squatting down and poking Zarniwoop a few times.

"I'm going to try to ignore the fact that you left me stranded with that blerky ruler of the Universe," said Zarniwoop through gritted

teeth. "And i'm going to try to ignore the fact that you cost me Arthur Dent. -And, if you get me out of here, i'll even try to ignore the fact that i really want to kill you."

"Kill us?" said Zaphod in mock horror.

"Didn't you already do that?" said Trillian.

"That wasn't me," said Zarniwoop. "That was Fonk. Although i probably did give him the idea."

"It wasn't a very good idea," said Zaphod.

"It was a *brilliant* idea!" said Zarniwoop.

"Actually, it was quite black," said Trillian.

"Ooh, i like black!" said Zaphod, standing up and prodding Zarniwoop with his toe.

"I've picked up a black spaceship," said Trillian, starting to walk away.

"Ooh, i like black spaceships!" said Zaphod, following her.

"Wait!" yelled Zarniwoop. "Get me out!" He struggled a bit, causing the Constrict-O-Netting to constrict further. "I *made* you, Zaphod Beeblebrox! The President of the Galaxy! The Heart of Gold! I gave you that incredible ship! GET ME OUT!"

Zarniwoop started going through all the curse words he could think of as Zaphod and Trillian walked out of the convention hall.

"Ah, the Heart of Gold," said Zaphod wistfully. "That was a zarking hoopy ship. I wonder what became of it?"

"Probably sold for scrap after the Krikkiters ripped the guts out of it." said Trillian.

"Shame," said Zaphod. They'd arrived in the atrium where Nodwedge sat next to her robotic exoskeleton looking dejected. Zaphod looked at her, then blinked both eyes in one of his heads at Trillian, who correctly interpreted this, as Zaphod had used half of his available eyes, as a wink. "Shame about Arthur Dent being killed and all that," he said loudly to Trillian.

"Yes," said Trillian, equally as loud, "he was a great pet." Nodwedge looked up from where she was sitting. Zaphod and Trillian strolled very slowly and casually by.

"You know what else makes a really great pet?" said Zaphod,

slightly too loudly.

“What?” said Trillian, with a smirk.

“A great speckled galactophagic cursing zarniwooper.”

“I agree!” said Trillian, trying not to laugh. “It’s too bad you couldn’t keep that one under the net in the convention hall we just left!”

“Yes, tragic. It’s a fine specimen, and *very rare*,” said Zaphod with a wild grin. “But i simply have no room for it.”

Zaphod and Trillian hurried out of the atrium as Nodwedge climbed eagerly into her robotic exoskeleton. “You’re much more fun with two heads,” said Trillian, latching on to one of Zaphod’s arms.

“Yeah, that’s why i had the second one put back on. Way too dull with just the one.”

Chapter 71

Arthur awoke in the night. Fenchurch lay sleeping on the couch next to him and Arthur had fallen asleep in a half-sit, half-slouch at one end of the couch. They had talked well into the night while the others had found beds in various states of repair in the upper rooms of the house they'd chosen to spend the night in.

Arthur thought that he'd heard a noise, but also realized that he had to pee. Not knowing where the loo was, he went outside.

As he stepped off the porch to find a suitable hedge or shrub to wee into, he heard voices in the distance. "Hello?" he called out tentatively. "Is anybody there?"

There was, of course, no answer. But the voices continued and Arthur followed the sound down the road to the field where God's spaceship was parked. There were lights on inside and around the craft and Arthur saw some figures near the doorway. As he neared them, he saw that it was God, Ford, and, to his surprise, Barnexa, one of the Keepers. They all looked up when they heard him approach and he saw that they were all standing around a fourth person who was lying on the ground next to the spaceship, apparently dead or at least unconscious.

"Arthur!" said Ford. "What are you doing out at this hour without a nightcap on? He pulled a long cap out of his pocket and slapped it on Arthur's head. This confused Arthur, but he didn't give it much thought when he saw the body on the ground.

"Is that Random?"

"Er, yes," said Ford. "But she's not dead, if that's what you're thinking."

"She was trying to steal my ship," said God, "and i've had just about enough of people stealing my ship!"

"So we had to shoot her," said Ford. "Well, good night."

"Wait!" said Arthur. "Is she..."

"She'll be fine," said God. "Just knocked out. She'll wake up with

a headache and a craving for some sort of baked wheat-based product.”

“Well, good night!” reiterated Ford.

“Wait,” said Arthur again.

“You keep saying that.”

“Well, what are you all doing out here in the middle of the night?”

“Technically, it’s not the middle,” said Ford. “It’s more toward the end.”

“And why is there a Keeper here?”

Barnexa looked at God, who looked at Ford, who looked at Arthur, then at God, then down at Random, and finally back to Arthur. “Well, what are you doing out here?” he said.

“Er, well, i had to pee,” said Arthur. “But then i heard voices...”

“I don’t see how those are connected,” said Ford.

Arthur didn’t know what to make of that. Ford was acting as though he’d gone right ’round the bend.

“Arthur,” said God in that sort of kindly old man voice that’s very hard to say no to. “Why don’t you go and use the loo in the ship and by the time you’re done we’ll have organized our thoughts and we’ll explain everything as best we can, OK?”

Ford stepped aside to let Arthur into the spaceship and they all looked at him expectantly. He gave them one more curious look, then climbed aboard and made use of the facilities to relieve himself.

The blinding sunlight caught him by surprise when he stepped out of the loo and it took a moment for his brain to register that he was once again on the beach with the shack where the crazy old man with the not-talking cat lived. At first, Arthur was annoyed, but then he realized that at least he could now thank the old man for the tea he’d had the last time he was here. He further realized as he was walking up to the shack that he would probably have to have some more tea so that he could use the outhouse again to get back to the Machina X.

Arthur knocked on the door and waited, but there was no sound from within. “Hello?” he called out for the second time in a tock. “Is anybody there?”

"I'm not sure," said the voice of the old man from inside the shack. "Can you see me?"

"Er, no," said Arthur. "The door's closed."

"Then perhaps there's nobody here."

"But i can hear you talking."

"How do you know that it's me and not my cat?"

"Your cat can't talk."

"Hmm, perhaps you're right. Although i seem to remember hearing him talk once from behind a door, asking if anybody was there."

"That was me!"

"Was it? I can't be sure. I can't see you, so you may in fact be my cat."

Arthur had had enough of this. He opened the door. The old man was standing in his kitchen, holding his cat. "Ah!" he said. "So you *do* exist, and you're not my cat. How wonderful!" He set the cat down and turned to the stove. "I was just about to have some tea. Would you like some?" Arthur noticed that there was already two settings of teacups and saucers on the table. He sat down and the old man poured the tea. "You're welcome," he said, before Arthur had a chance to say anything.

"Oh. Thank you," said Arthur. "And i meant to thank you for the last cup but i ended up leaving before i'd planned."

"Oh, is this your last cup?" said the old man, sitting down across from Arthur.

"Er, no, the cup i had with you when i was here before."

"Have you been here before?"

"Er, yes, just... quite recently, i think."

"You're not sure?"

Arthur wasn't sure. Had this been a beach in Brighton, he could have said most assuredly "Yes, i was here yesterday, don't you remember?" But this wasn't Brighton and it wasn't earth and Arthur wasn't even sure if where he was now was in the same universe as where he'd left. It was day here, wherever he was, and it was night on Golgafrincham, and the only thing he knew for sure was that he wasn't sure about anything except that he would rather be sitting on a

couch with Fenchurch in an abandoned house in an abandoned village on an abandoned planet than sitting here in this shack with this old man. He drank his tea quickly even though it was much too hot.

When he'd finished wincing from the mild scalding he'd just given himself, he set the cup down and looked across the table at the old man who had kind eyes even though they seemed to be staring in slightly different directions.

"What's it all about?" he asked. "What's this whole thing with life, the Universe, and everything?"

The old man's eyes became disconcertingly focused and he scratched his arm, then looked at where he'd scratched. "They tell me that there are millions of cells in my skin," he said. "I think that there are millions of tiny particles in the cells, and there are millions of people on planets, and millions of planets in the Universe... It's too much to think about sometimes. That's why i stay in my shack."

Arthur frowned. This wasn't quite the answer he was expecting. Of course, he wasn't expecting the old man to blurt out "forty two" either, but he hoped that it might be something a little less vague. "So, er, the answer is...?" he ventured.

"For you?" said the old man with a shrug. "I don't know. You live short lives, you don't do much, and you're always replaced. But you're part of everything." He scratched his arm again and brushed away what he'd scratched off.

"So... you're saying that i'm a skin cell?" asked Arthur, hoping that the answer would be no. The old man smiled at him.

"Perhaps you can aspire to be a freckle."

Chapter 72

Arthur stood in the outhouse contemplating what the old man had said. He finished his business and turned to the door, expecting to step out into the hallway of the Machina X, but when he opened the door, he was greeted by bright sunlight and at first he was worried that the Portal Potty hadn't transported him anywhere. That thought was very quickly replaced with panic however, as the door dematerialized in his hand and he became suddenly aware that there was no ground underneath his foot. Actually, there *was* ground underneath Arthur's foot, it was just a good bit lower than he'd expected and in short order he was made acutely aware of just exactly where it was when he fell down to it in an ungraceful sprawl.

The sprawl was made even more ungraceful by the fact that he had landed on a pile of food—sacks of potatoes and rice, bags of flour, and an assortment of other nourishing staples. The oddness of the very earthlike nature of these foodstuffs hadn't hit Arthur yet, as he was still trying to figure out where he was and how he got there.

He looked back behind him to where he'd come from and all that was there was a large black object that looked very much like the obelisk in the movie *2001: A Space Odyssey*. He tapped it. It was very solid and black and there was no door on it. He frowned and tapped on it again. It remained very solid and very black and there was still no door.

Finally Arthur shrugged, chalked it up to yet another weirdness of the Universe, and looked around to see where he was. He didn't have to look far. He was in the middle of the town square in the little village on Golgafrincham and it was exactly as it had been the day before when he was here except that there was now an obelisk with a pile of food at its base.

"Arthur!" came a welcome voice. Arthur turned to see Fenchurch coming across the square towards him. "Where have you been? We thought you'd left with the others!"

“The others?”

“Ford, Rutlow, and God. Took off in the middle of the night. Sputty figured you’d gone with them but it didn’t seem like you to leave like that.”

She looked at him, and in her smile was everything that was right in the Universe. Arthur had nowhere to go, nothing to do, and there was a beautiful woman standing in front of him who had nothing better to do than to smile at him, and it was wonderful. The Vogons could come and blow up Golgafrincham tomorrow to make way for any number of interstellar bypasses and it wouldn’t matter. Because Arthur was, right now, right here, happy.

“C’mon,” said Fenchurch, taking Arthur by the hand, “let’s have breakfast. Random’s making pancakes.”

They walked across the square to the big house they’d chosen to stay in the night before, and even though Arthur was already smiling so much that he was in danger of pulling a cheek muscle, he smiled a bit more when he saw the number on the house. It was number 42.

The end.

Epilogue

Marvin floated in space above Frogstar World B. Somewhere on the surface of the desolate planet below him an earlier version of himself was sitting in a small metal box composing little hummable songs about sitting in a small metal box on Frogstar World B. The Marvin in space calculated the probability that the Marvin in the box would self-terminate if it knew it was destined to be left floating in space above itself.

That was a very easy calculation and it made Marvin depressed by how easy it was. He moved on to slightly more difficult calculations.

He determined the probability that he would be picked up by a spaceship. This was very low. Then he calculated the probability of being run into by a spaceship. This was even lower.

Finally he decided to calculate the probability that a specific ship would run into him. As he was dealing with probabilities so gargantly low that they were verging on infinitely improbable, he chose the Heart of Gold as the spaceship that might run into him.

“Ow,” he said morosely as he finished the calculation. He spun himself slowly around to see what had bumped into him. It was the Heart of Gold—dark, derelict, lifeless. He calculated the infinitesimally small chance that, after being cannibalized by the Krikkiters and set adrift, it would ever run again.

The lights on the Heart of Gold flicked on and it powered up with a gentle hum.

Share & Enjoy

Add your name, pass it along.

Name _____

Date

Name _____

Date

Name

Date

