

The Big Bang Burger Bar

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

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Chapter 1

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Chapter 2

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Chapter 3

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

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

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

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

Chapter 4

Half an hour later, Arthur had completed his second trip from the bottom of the staircase to the top and back again. He had tried every door on every floor from 4 to 11 and found every one to be locked. He did it twice just to make sure that he hadn't missed one. Now he stood in front of the door at the end of a narrow dim hallway under the bottom-most set of steps. He hadn't tried this door yet, partly because of the various red and yellow warning signs on it and the large loud-looking sirens and lights, but mostly because of the presence of a number of lethal-looking weapon-type things protruding from the walls and pointing at anyone who might be standing in front of this door with the thought of opening it.

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

Chapter 5

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Chapter 6

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

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

“Ford!” said Arthur in surprise.

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

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

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

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

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

“Funny. It’s locked.”

“Yes. That’s the thing that i thought you should know.”

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

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

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

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

“Huh. That one’s locked too.”

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

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

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

“Hm?” asked Arthur.

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

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

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

Ford looked up at Arthur. “Who?”

“Random. My, um, my daughter.”

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

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

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

where you are?”

“In a stairwell,” said Arthur.

“In...?” asked Ford.

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

“In...?” asked Ford again.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Hello?” it said. “Is anybody there?”

Chapter 7

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Excuse me?” said Arthur.

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Hmmpf,” said Murkle. “Don’t know what’s so lovely ‘bout it.”

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

“Seems the same to me,” said Murkle. “What’s that you’ve got there?”

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

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

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

Arthur stared at the woman some more. “I don’t care what you named me. My name is—Aauggggkkkgllngg!!” Arthur collapsed on the floor next to Murkle.

“That’s a funny name,” said Murkle, poking Arthur with a popsicle stick.

“He’s still learning his name,” said the woman.

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

“Morning, Nodwedge! Whatcha got there, flying ape?”

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

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

“I told you,” said the woman, who’s name was apparently Nodwedge, “he’s an orangutan.”

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

“Why not?” said Nodwedge.

“Well,” said Arthur, trying to think of exactly why not, “it’s... it’s uncivilized!”

“But i’m very civilized!” said Nodwedge. “And i’ve purchased you as a pet. Therefore what i’ve done must be civilized.”

“Gotcha there!” said Umplebeet to Arthur.

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

“Being what?” said Murkle.

“Just... being,” said Arthur. “A human being.”

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

“It’s true,” said Nodwedge, smiling and nodding slightly.

“Umplebeet here is being himself.”

“It’s humbling,” said Umplebeet, bowing.

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

Arthur stared at them all in disbelief. “You’re all mad,” he said.

“I think he’s being an ape,” said Umplebeet.

“Orangutan!” insisted Nodwedge.

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

“Oh look! He thinks he’s people! Isn’t that sweet!”

Chapter 8

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

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

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

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

Ford took a stool and slapped a few of his newly acquired Altarian

dollars on the bar.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Ford barely had time to retch at that line before feeling overwhelmingly compelled to dive noisily to the floor, scattering barstools everywhere. What compelled him to suddenly do this was the appear-

ance of the face of Fonk on the formerly blue screen, who was now amiably chatting with the bartender. Ford waited for the clattering of the bar stools to calm down, then listened in. He caught the tail end of what Fonk was saying, and it didn't sound good."

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

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

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

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

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

"You Ford Prefect?" said one of the Vogons.

"Yeah, that's him," said the other.

"How do you know?" said the first one.

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

The second Vagon, who's name was Ergo, put his fingers to his

nose and squeezed, making a sound like “Nnngk.” He looked like he wasn’t at all pleased with his partner’s uncharacteristic cleverness. “Anyone could come running out of a bar matching his description!” he said. “We have to make sure it’s him.”

“Fine, do it your way,” said the first Vogon, who’s name happened to be Nnngk.

Ergo turned to Ford. “Now, you Ford Prefect?”

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

“Ford Prefect,” said Nnngk.

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

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

“I don’t think you’re telling the truth.”

“Oh, i am!” said Ford, folding his arms in front of him, nodding his head, and blinking. “Scout’s honour!”

“Guess it’s not him then,” said Nnngk. “Good. I haven’t killed anything in days.”

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

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

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

“So if you’re not Ford Prefect...” began Ergo.

“Ohhhhhh! Ford PREfect,” said Ford. “I’m sorry, i thought you said Ford PERFect.” He smiled as genially as he could at the two Vogons.

“So your name is Ford Prefect?” asked Nnngk, enunciating each syllable as painfully as possible.

“Scout’s honour!” said Ford, tugging at his earlobe and wiggling his nose.

“Right. Let’s go,” said Ergo.

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

Chapter 9

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

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

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

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

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

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

Chapter 10

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

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

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

"Hello again," said Fonk politely to Ford.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Zarniwoop quit?" offered Ford.

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

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

"Sure," he said.

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

"Thanks," said Ford, succinctly.

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

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

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

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

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

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

done was wipe him out of existence.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Ah,” said Ford, pretending he understood.

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

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

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

“Um, thanks?” offered Ford.

No, no,” countered Fonk. “It’s simply our job. It offers more

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

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

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

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

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

"It made you the boss," said Ford.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Chapter 11

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

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

Arthur thought about where Ford might be at that moment.

Chapter 12

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

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

“Ah,” said Ford, rubbing his elbow.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Overthrowing dictators?” suggested Fonk.

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Ah, Ford Prefect!” said the mouse. “I’m so delighted to finally meet you!”

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

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

“Hi, Squinkles,” said Ford, subtly exercising his foot muscles.

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

“Forty-two,” said Ford.

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

“What do you get when you multiply—”

“No, that’s not it!” interrupted Squinkles, running around in

circles a few times.

“Could be,” said Ford with a shrug.

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

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

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

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

Chapter 13

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Chapter 14

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

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

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

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

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

Chapter 15

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

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

“Must?” asked Ford.

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

“Oh. Yeah,” said Ford.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Oh yes," said Squinkles.

"More than once," added Fonk.

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

"The first time," added Fonk.

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

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

itively complicated and dear, even for my resources, so you'll have to find an alternate means of getting there."

"So it's not a piece of cake," said Ford, slightly less enthusiastically.

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

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

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

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

Ford proceeded to not-at-all panic.

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

Chapter 16

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

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

galaxy, just sitting there for the taking.

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

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

He didn't have long to wait.

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

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

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

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

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

"Arthur!" said a fourth voice.

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

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

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

"Half an arthur, of course."

"How can something be half of itself?"

"A man enslaved is only half a man."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"No," said Arthur.

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

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

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

Ford stared at him some more.

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

“Arthur, you’re a pet.”

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

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

“Isn’t he supposed to be a tmik-tmik?” asked another onlooker.

“Arthur, you have to come with me,” said Ford. “It’s really, really, really... um, *really* important.”

“Really?” asked Arthur, without much enthusiasm.

“Don’t tmik-tmik’s have feathers?” asked someone else.

“Really fantastically really,” insisted Ford.

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

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

“Why?” said Arthur.

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

“Why?” repeated Ford, to stall for time.

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

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

“Right,” said Arthur. “Let’s go.”

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

Chapter 17

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

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

"So as you can see," Fonk finished up, "it simply isn't in the budget."

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

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

"Ah," said Ford, disappointed.

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

"Ah!" said Ford, not at all disappointed.

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

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

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

"Yes, lunch," said Fonk. "I find that it's always a good idea when starting a trip to have a good lunch." He winked at Ford and Arthur, scooped up the silvernium tray with Squinkles on it, and swept out of the room. Arthur looked at Ford with what Ford correctly interpreted

as a puzzled expression, although it didn't look that different from the expression that Arthur had on his face a good proportion of the time.

"Read the book, Earthman," said Ford, tapping Arthur's brand new copy of the Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy.

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

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

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

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

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

"Um, Ford..." started Arthur.

"Yep?" said Ford, still spinning his chair around.

"Why are we flying backwards?"

"Only way to fly a PEE-Coupe," said Ford, reversing the direction

he was spinning.

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

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

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

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

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

Chapter 18

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

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

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

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

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

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

Chapter 19

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Chapter 20

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

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

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

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

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

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

“That’s *us*, dimtwit,” grumbled Ford under his breath as he kicked Arthur’s other shin.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Well, when are we going to eat?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Wasn’t the Earth blown up?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Chapter 21

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

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

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

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

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

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

Chapter 22

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Bloora looked up. “There it is again!”

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

They both looked at the door.

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Hey, Dinzy?” she asked.

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

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

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

“I don’t know.”

“Well, why don’t you look it up?”

“I’m on break.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

There was a moment of silence.

"Who are you?" asked Dinzy.

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

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

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

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

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

Bloora and Dinzy looked thoughtful for a moment.

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

“Would the prefix do?” asked Ford.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Chapter 23

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

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

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

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

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

“It’s best not to know,” said Ford.

Chapter 24

“It’s best not to know” is the central tenet of Ignism.

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

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

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

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

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

Chapter 25

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

"It's beautiful, isn't it?" Arthur said to Ford.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“We don’t?”

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

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

“Anywhere but here.”

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

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

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

“Because you usually don’t.”

“What?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“F—Fen... Fen...”

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

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

“Really? When?”

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

“Don’t recall. Is she pretty?”

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

“All the better, is she single?”

“No. Well, technically yes i suppose.”

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

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

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

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

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

“Where are we going Arthur? What address?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

Chapter 26

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Fenchurch?" he asked.

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

"Fenchurch Pan Dowdy?" he asked.

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

"Ford Prefect," said Ford.

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

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

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

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

“Fenchurch?” he said, surprised and confused.

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

“It’s Arthur.”

“Arthur who?”

“Arthur Dent.”

“And i know you from...?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Yes i have, we—”

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

“But we went—”

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

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

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

“We haven’t met?”

“Not until very recently.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

Ford stared at Arthur. “What?”

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

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

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

And maybe plant a garden.”

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

“Belgium!” said Ford.

“Wow!” said Fenchurch.

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

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

Ford dashed off and Arthur looked at Fenchurch.

“What was that yellow thing?” she asked.

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

“What are Vogons?”

“Ooh, you don’t want to meet one.”

“Where are they from?”

“I don’t know... planet Vogon?”

“Where are *you* from?”

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

“Oh. I’m sorry.”

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

“Why would the Vogons want to destroy Islington?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Planning a long trip?" he asked Ford.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Where are we going?” asked Arthur.

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

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

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

“Oh,” said Arthur.

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

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

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

Ford at that point.

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

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

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

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

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

“Have we sunk?” he asked.

No. We’re upside down,” said Ford.

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

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

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

“Oh yes,” said Ford. “Spectacularly.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

“That was neat!” she said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Ford, why—” began Arthur.

“Muscle relaxant,” said Ford between gulps.

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

“I am?” she asked.

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

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

“Who, what?” said Ford.

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

“What’s a pirate?” asked Ford.

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

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

Chapter 27

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

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

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

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

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

Chapter 28

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

"Hey Arthur!" yelled Ford. "Indoor pool! Pretty fancy!"

"Where are we?" asked Fenchurch.

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

"Wow," breathed Fenchurch.

"Yeah," said Ford.

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

Arthur and Fenchurch treaded water in silent contemplation of

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

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

"Hoopy!" said Ford.

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

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

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

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

"You can speak dolphin?" asked Fenchurch.

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

"You have a fish in your ear?"

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

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

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

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

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

"It's been destroyed before?"

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

“How is that possible?”

“Time travel, apparently.”

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

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

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

“Oh?” asked Fenchurch when Ford’s head bobbed back above the surface. “In what field?”

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

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

Chapter 29

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

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

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

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

Chapter 30

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

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

"Anywhere near a bar!" was Ford's immediate answer.

"Arrr, consider it done."

"Thanks for the ride!" piped up Fenchurch.

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

"Save yer thanks fer Davy Jones, Earthlings. 'Twas nothing."

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

"Arrr, so long, and thanks for all the fish!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Fenchurch entered and found a Thumarian in the room.

“Hello,” Fenchurch said politely.

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

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

“I’m sorry?” said Arthur.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Fenchurch if i can't, OK?

"Why can't you?"

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

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

"Alright Arthur. I'll keep an eye on her. I promise."

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

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

"No," said Arthur.

"Did you talk to her?" asked Ford.

"I said hello," said Fenchurch.

"Don't talk to anyone!" said Ford.

"Well, she asked—"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“What are they saying?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Chapter 31

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

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

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

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

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

Chapter 32

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

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

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

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

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

Fenchurch looked skeptical. "Really?" she asked.

"Oh yes," said Arthur.

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

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

"Right," said Arthur.

"Left," said Ford.

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

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

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

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

Arthur still stared, dumfounded.

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

“Well, i...”

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

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

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

“It is,” said Ford with a wink.

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

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

in a toast. Arthur and Fenchurch raised theirs.

“To Earth!” said Fenchurch.

“To Earth!” said Arthur.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Where’s the Big Bang Burger Bar?” asked Fenchurch.

“You mean when,” said Ford.

“I do?”

“There’s only one Big Bang, and it’s a great place to have lunch.”

“Really? *The* Big Bang?”

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

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

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

“Um, no,” said Fenchurch, “what does it mean?”

“No idea,” said Ford, and promptly took a nap.

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

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

“Yeah? Where ’bouts?”

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

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

“Er, thanks,” said Arthur.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Chapter 33

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

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

“Dolphin?” Fenchurch asked Arthur.

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

“The what?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“I’m an Englishman,” interjected Arthur.

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

“Er, accounting, mostly.” said Ford.

“Accounting?”

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

“What’s he not telling me?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Um, well, i suppose.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Odd?" asked Arthur.

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

They watched as Od finished his story to another round of

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Chapter 34

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

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

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

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

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

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

Chapter 35

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“I ended up in a stairwell.”

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

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

“Wow. Why’d it take so long to find her?”

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

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

“Oh,” said Arthur. “Well, we’ve only been back a couple of days.”

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

“Oooh! What a cool shirt! Where’d you get it?”

Arthur looked at her suspiciously. “I’m sorry, what did you just say?”

“I said you have a cool shirt.”

“No, before that.”

“Hmm, i don’t know. What were we talking about?”

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

“Ew! That’s not cool,” said Trillian. “Arthur, i’ve gotta go be a cool

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Really?"

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

"Really."

"His name is Slartibartfast."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"No, he's just stunned," said Ford. "He'll come back around."

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

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

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

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

“Yes.”

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

“Thanks,” said Fenchurch, smiling.

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

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

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

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

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

Chapter 36

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

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

"Oh yes, quite," said the woman.

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

"Yes, well, my name's Pithya, and this is my husband Vreebleburt." Vreebleburt nodded. "We're on holiday!"

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

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

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

"Saw 'em."

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

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

"Mm."

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

"Mm."

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

"Mm."

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

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

"Mm."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Chapter 37

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Beer," said Arthur.

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

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

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

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

“So what does that mean?” asked Fenchurch?

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

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

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

“Arthur!” he yelled. “Time to go! Both of you!” Then he continued toward the aisle and ran toward one of the entrance ramps. Arthur looked at Fenchurch and shrugged. They both got up and started making their way down the row of seats.

They caught up to Ford standing at the base of one of the ramps, looking furtively around the concourse.

“Is the coast clear?” he asked.

“Clear of what?” asked Arthur, peering around the corner and down the concourse.

“You’ll know.”

Arthur tried to think exactly what he might be looking for as he stepped out into the concourse. There were various people milling about getting food and souvenirs but nothing unusual enough to warrant fear in his mind. He looked back at Ford and shrugged, then turned to walk down the concourse. Fenchurch began to follow him.

“Arthur!” Ford hissed, causing both Arthur and Fenchurch to stop and look back at him. “Not that way!”

“But i can see Information Booth Nine just up there by the bend.”

“What?”

“Information Booth Nine. That’s where we’re going, isn’t it?”

“Arthur, when you’re me, and you’re so quite obviously not, and someone pages you to be at Information Booth Nine, the *last* place you want to go is to Information Booth Nine!” He took one last glance around the concourse, then took off in the other direction, walking quickly, but, he hoped, non-suspiciously. Arthur sighed and followed him, and Fenchurch followed them both as the nice businesslike voice came on over the public address system again.

“Will Mr. Ford Perfect now please report to Information Booth Ten. Ford Perfect to Information Booth Ten, please. Thank you.”

Ford skidded to a stop, eyeing Information Booth Ten, which was just down the concourse from where he’d stopped. He looked around at the various shops and dove into one that sold hats and jerseys of the home team. A hover-bot sailed over Arthur and Fenchurch’s heads as they walked toward the shop. It stopped in front of the shop and hovered, blue and green lights blinking. The public address system came on again.

“Will Mr. Ford Perfect—” began the nice businesslike voice before a voice in the background said “*Pre-fect.*”

“Don’t tell me what to say!” snapped the first voice, coldly, before resuming its nice businesslike tone. “Will Mr. Ford Perfect please remain in Souvenir Shop Four. Ford Perfect, remain in Souvenir Shop Four, please. Thank You.”

Arthur put a hand on Fenchurch’s arm and stopped in the middle of the concourse. He decided that maybe they’d better let this play out rather than be a part of it. In a second or two, Ford came bolting out of the shop wearing a magenta and green Engreedle Ergies Ballgy team jersey and hat, still with the tags dangling off of them. He ran by Arthur and Fenchurch as an alarm wailed and a security-bot zoomed out of the shop after him. The hover-bot that had been waiting outside the shop took off after Ford as well and in a matter of seconds, both bots had fired snare-nets at Ford, which brought him crashing down to the floor in the middle of the concourse. he lay very still and both bots circled over him, beeping. Before long, the beeps from the two bots became louder and more frequent and some whistles and squeaks were thrown in as well, until they were bumping each other and

throwing out a variety of loud and stacatto noises, many of which were most likely slurs as to the dubious parentage of the other bot. While this mid-air argument over which bot had jurisdiction over the snared body below them continued in ever-increasing screeches, that snared body was moving very very slowly in a way which would extricate itself from the snare-nets. Snare-nets, as Ford knew all too well, constrict tighter at any sudden movements, so the trick to escaping them is to play almost dead, but not quite.

The hover-bot's argument had escalated to a full-scale laser battle overhead by the time Ford carefully slid his last limb out from under the nets. But just as he did, a security cart slid up the concourse and stopped right by the nets.

"Hey, you!" said one of the two passengers in the cart. Ford didn't bother to find out if they were talking to him or not, but assumed that they probably were. He turned and ran, but the other passenger in the cart already had his Zap-O-Matic Self-Aiming Security Rifle out and in a snap of light shot Ford square in the back. Ford crumpled to a stop right in front of Arthur and Fenchurch.

Fenchurch looked shocked that someone had been shot in a public place right in front of them. Arthur looked shocked that *Ford* had been shot in a public place right in front of them, which he didn't think was possible as it always seemed that Ford could find his way out of any situation whatsoever, and usually alive.

Ergo and Nnngk stepped out of the security cart and waddled up to Ford's body. Nnngk kicked it gently. Ergo looked at Fenchurch and Arthur.

"Which one of you is Fenchurch Pan Dowdy?"

Fenchurch raised her hand weakly before Arthur had a chance to stop her.

"Right," said Ergo. "You're coming with us."

Nnngk reached down, grabbed one of Ford's legs, and started dragging him to the cart.

"Now wait just a minute!" said Arthur, stepping between Ergo and Fenchurch. "I won't let you."

"And who are you?" said Ergo, not really caring.

“Arthur Dent,” said Arthur Dent, bravely but stupidly.

“Right,” said Ergo. “Fonk said we had no use for you.” He pulled out a laser pistol and shot Arthur in a snap of light.

In the few milliseconds that Arthur still had the brain capacity to imagine things, he imagined that this was what it must feel like to be stung by ten thousand fire ants all at once. Then he collapsed to the floor.

Chapter 38

The great winged duck-billed princess fairy cake hovered in the inky blackness of space. Before it floated a partially evolved human creature, slowly coming out of a deep sleep. A curling tongue flicked out of the mouth of the princess fairy cake and spun the human lazily around. His eyes opened.

“Where am i?” he asked.

“You’re in space,” said the fairy cake.

“How come i can breathe?” he asked.

“Good point,” said the fairy cake, and suddenly they were sitting on the floor of a desert with the sky all red and purple as the sun was setting.

“Now,” said the fairy cake, “what do you get when you multiply six by nine?”

“What?” said the man, noting that they were now sitting on a giant Scrabble board and he had turned into the letter A. Several tentacles burst out of the fairy cake and spelled the word “BRIAN”, which the man was about to protest about since proper names were not allowed, but when he looked again, it said “BRAIN.” He pondered asking just what on or off Earth was going on when a giant half ladybug, half salamander leapt up over the edge of the Scrabble board and ate the fairy cake, tentacles and all, in one bite.

“Arthur,” it said, as it advanced in a slow, sidewise scuttle. “Arthur!”

Arthur tried to move or defend himself or just do *something*, but as he was a Scrabble tile, there wasn’t much he could do. He felt a poke in his ribs, which he thought was odd, since Scrabble tiles didn’t have ribs.

“Arthur,” said the giant salamander-ladybug again, this time in a distinctly female voice. Arthur noticed that everything seemed to be fading away and he felt an overall soreness in places that Scrabble tiles didn’t have, like feet and elbows and necks. He opened his eyes.

Arthur Dent was lying on the floor of the concourse of the Engreedle Ergies Ballgy stadium. Trillian and Od were standing over him.

“See? I told you he was just sleeping,” said Od. “I don’t know why your species needs so much sleep. Snargly waste of time.” He stepped over the velvet rope that had been set up around the sprawled body of Arthur and was immediately distracted by something in a nearby shop. “Oooh! That’s cool!” he said as he walked away.

Trillian helped Arthur stand up and he tried to work the stiffness out. Then he remembered why he was there.

“Where’s Fenchurch?” he asked, looking up and down the concourse.

“I dunno,” said Trillian. “I thought she was with you.”

Arthur spun around in a near panic. “Fonk!” he said.

“Who’s Frank?”

“Fonk,” said Arthur. “He the head of the Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy. I’ve got to get to him. They can’t take Fenchurch’s Brian, didn’t you tell me that?”

“Who’s Brian?”

“Brain!” said Arthur. “Her brain! You told me they can’t take it. I’ve got to get to Fred!”

“Who’s Fred?”

“Fred is the planet where the Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy is!!!” yelled Arthur, completely exasperated.

“Arthur, you’re not being cool.”

“Of course i’m not being cool! My girlfriend’s been kidnapped by Vogons, Ford’s been shot—”

“Ford’s been shot?” said Od, wandering back over with a new hat on.

“Er, yes.”

“When?”

“Well, just before i was.”

“You were shot?”

Arthur looked dumbfounded. “Didn’t you just see me lying unconscious on the floor?”

“I thought you were sleeping,” said Od. He turned to Trillian.

“C’mon, let’s go take all these dimtwits home.” He turned back to Arthur. “Monkeyman, you need a ride anywhere?”

“Well, yes, actually...” but Od and Trillian were walking away, discussing Od’s new hat and how cool it was. Arthur sighed and followed along.

The ride wasn’t very interesting. Arthur just sat and worried, and since he wasn’t acting very cool, everyone else avoided him, which was fine with Arthur. Trillian had managed to convince everyone that they were cool and anyone who didn’t think so wasn’t cool enough to know what cool was. She was amazed that she got paid for this.

Od’s chrome schoolbus/spaceship landed with a “wump” on the planet Bleen next to a crazy building with porches, stoops, verandas, patios, and sundecks everywhere. Everyone gathered on the largest patio where Od made a short speech praising all of the clients’ coolness, then presented each of them with a pair of sunglasses and a small towel with his picture on it. He then ushered them all out and they went back to their jobs as information processors and account specialists with the fairly useless knowledge that they were cool again, which they probably weren’t but no one around them was cool enough to notice. Od didn’t get much repeat business.

When the clients had all left, Arthur followed Trillian and Od into the house. A smooth voice welcomed them as they walked into the large room off of the main patio.

“Hello Mr. Brox and Miss Trillian. I see you have a visitor, will he be staying?”

“Dunno. Earthman, you staying?”

“Er, well, no, i was hoping that—”

“Nope!” said Od to the house.

“Very good sir. You have 36 messages.”

“Delete ‘em!”

There was a short pause, then a soft “ding!”

“Deleted. Will there be anything else?”

“Nope!” said Od, as he pulled something out of a jar and bit into it.

“Very good sir. Miss Trillian, I saved the latest episode of The Quantrino Basing Challenge for you. Would you like to view it now?”

“Sure,” said Trillian, flopping down on a large couch. The wall in front of her flicked on and the program began.

“Er, excuse me,” said Arthur, looking from Trillian to Od. “When are we going to Fred?”

“Who’s Fred?” said Od, between mouthfuls of whatever it was that he was eating.

Arthur clenched his fists and tried to remain calm. “Fred is the planet where the Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy headquarters is.”

“Yeah? So what’s there?”

“It’s where Ford and Fenchurch have been kidnapped to!” said Arthur, trying not to scream.

“Ford’s been kidnapped?” said Od, pulling another thing out of the jar he was eating from. “I thought he was shot.”

“Yes, well, he... Look, can’t we just go there?”

“Go wherever you want monkeyman, I’m not stopping you.”

“I... I thought you were going to give me a ride.”

“I *did* give you a ride. From Engreedle 5 to Bleen. You were there, now you’re here. If you wanted to go somewhere else, you should have told me when we were flying. I’m done flying for today.” He bit into another one of the somethings from the jar and chewed noisily.

Arthur started and stopped about four sentences without managing to figure out what he wanted to say except that he was very annoyed right now but couldn’t find the vocabulary to express just how extremely annoyed he was. Around about the fifth false start, Trillian turned around on the couch.

“Arthur!”

Arthur stopped trying to vocalize his emotions and looked at her.

“You have a Sub-Etha Sens-O-Matic in your bag. Why don’t you just hitchhike there? It’d be easier than getting old one-head over there to do it.” Od grinned and waved his hand around where his other head used to be.

“Hitchhike?” said Arthur.

“It’s the safest way to travel, Arthur, you should know that,” said Trillian, as she turned back to the huge screen in front of her.

“And when you see Ford,” said Od, “tell him to stop by. We’ll have some Bleenian crispy-dip and splinter-fingers.”

Arthur stood there in the large room and was about to say something about how friends usually try to help friends out but then he realized that on all occasions, Trillian, with or without whatever piece of brain she was missing, and Od, with two heads or one, had never really been Arthur’s friends. In fact, most of the time they had been fairly unpleasant toward Arthur, when they even acknowledged him at all. He turned and marched out of the house.

On the patio, he pulled the Sub Etha Sens-O-Matic out of his bag. He’d seen Ford use one of these but he’d never actually used one himself. All of his previous hitchhiking had been from one well-populated area to another and so never required hunting for passing spaceships. He examined the Sens-O-Matic closely to see if it was obvious how it worked.

There really isn’t much to a Sub-Etha Sens-O-Matic. The O Company had made it, like most of its products, simple and efficient. There’s a small light which glows green when it senses a spacecraft in the area, and a sens-O-pad under the thumb can be used to change the desired number of hitchhikers to be picked up. Fortunately for Arthur, it defaults to one.

After examining the Sens-O-Matic, Arthur decided that it was either much simpler than he suspected or far more complex. There were no dials or indicators anywhere and he couldn’t even find a switch to turn it on. But he was determined not to walk back inside and ask Od or Trillian how to use it, so finally, he just gripped it with his hand on what seemed to him to be the back-end of the thing. To his delight, a small green light came on, just above his thumb. It seemed to be getting dimmer, but as he watched, it started glowing brighter again. “Now,” he thought to himself, “how do i actually make this thing work?” He remembered that Ford had held the unit out, almost as if he was actually standing by a road, hitchhiking with just his thumb and not a Sub-Etha Sens-O-Matic, so Arthur held the Sens-O-Matic out at arms length, thinking that this must look awfully fool-

ish. That thought was quickly replaced by the thought that his feet had lifted off the ground, his legs had elongated and wrapped themselves three or four times around his body, and his arms had turned into neon pink garden hoses which were spraying confetti everywhere.

After a few seconds of this, his body returned to its familiar humanoid shape and Arthur crumpled to a heap on the rubberized floor of a neat but cluttered little spaceship. A man in hiking shorts, braces, and a bright orange shirt was standing over him.

“Howdy!” said the man. “Welcome aboard! Where ya headed?”

Arthur shook the grogginess from his head. “Fred,” he said, looking around at his surroundings.

“Hiya Fred!” said the man. “My name’s Smeerpop. This here’s my wife Luwielooowhee.” He pointed at a woman sitting in a chair knitting what looked like braided wire into what looked like a hat of some kind. She too was wearing hiking shorts, braces, and a bright orange shirt. “Hey Lu! This here’s Fred.”

“Arthur,” said Arthur.

“No, Smeerpop,” said Smeerpop, pointing at himself.

“No, *my* name’s Arthur. I want to go to the planet Fred.”

“Oh, Fred. Ain’t been there. Not exactly on our way, neither. But we’ll getcha somewhere, won’t we Lu?”

Luwielooowhee nodded, smiled, and kept knitting.

Chapter 39

Ford and Fenchurch sat in a small, dingy office on one of the lower floors of the Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy building. Ford was staring intently at the Vagon left to guard them with a look of extreme annoyance on his face. He'd found that this look, if cast upon certain people at social gatherings, usually got them to leave the room. It didn't seem to work on Vagons, but Ford was having a go at it anyway. Fenchurch just sat, thinking about what she didn't know about the galaxy two days ago.

The ride from Engreedle 5 to Fred had been fairly unpleasant. Ford of course had been unconscious for most of the trip so there wasn't much conversation to be had with him. This left the two Vagons, who Fenchurch tried repeatedly to engage in conversation or even to answer such simple questions as "who are you," "where are we going," or "why have you abducted me." But every attempt on Fenchurch's part met with blank stares from whichever Vagon she addressed.

So she spent the trip sitting and thinking. The enormity of the entire Earth being wiped out except for her and Arthur finally started to sink in, but on the other hand, looking at Earth's place in the awesome gargantuanness of the galaxy, not to mention the universe, made Earth's existence, or lack of it, pretty insignificant. She wasn't sure if she was comforted by that or not. In any case, she decided that she'd better learn how to get around the galaxy on her own without having to rely on being kidnapped from place to place. She was very glad that she'd decided to wear comfortable shoes on that last morning on Earth.

After a while of sitting in the dingy office, the second Vagon came in and waved his Zap-O-Matic at Ford and Fenchurch. "Let's go." he said.

They were marched out into the hallway where they were met by a chorus of "ding!"s as every lift in the building opened its door. They rode an extremely happy lift up to one of the upper floors and even-

tually were marched into a large well-appointed office where Fonk was waiting. He dismissed the Vogons and locked the door behind them.

"Hello again," he said to Ford. Ford didn't say anything. "And this must be Fenchurch?" he said, turning to her.

"Um, yes. Hello," said Fenchurch, eyeing the oddly double-elbowed arms of Fonk and wondering whether handshakes were customary in other parts of the galaxy that weren't Earth. Fortunately, Fonk didn't offer his. He just stood there and looked at her carefully.

"Her head looks awfully small," he said, turning to Ford. "Are you sure you got the right Fenchurch?"

Ford shrugged and sat down in one of the comfortable chairs in the office. "How many Fenchurch's can there be? It's a very uncommon name."

"Yes, but there were billions and billions of creatures on Earth," said Fonk. "Elementary statistics suggests that—"

"It's a very *very* uncommon name," said Fenchurch.

Fonk looked at her skeptically. "Fenchurch Pan Dowdy?"

"Yes, that's me," said Fenchurch, wondering what it was about her that made her not look like what someone named Fenchurch should look like.

"Hm," said Fonk, tapping his fingers to his lips. "Well, we shall see. Let's hope for everyone's sake that she is indeed the right Fenchurch Pan Dowdy of Earth." He looked suspiciously at Ford.

"Well, Arthur seemed pretty sure," said Ford, slouching down in his chair. "Knew where she lived and everything."

"Ah, yes, Mr. Dent. Quite an integral piece of this puzzle and so blissfully unaware of his own worth. If only you could have been bought for a new outfit and a travel bag of gadgets and souvenirs, Ford."

"Say, that reminds me," said Ford, sitting up. "When do i get paid?"

"Your debt will be erased as soon as the transaction with Squinkles and Miss Pan Dowdy is complete. If you remain a decent fellow for the rest of your stay here at the Guide, i may even approve all the charges you incurred on this, er, mission."

“Say, that reminds me of another thing,” said Ford. “My charge card stopped working.”

“Yes, well, as long as i am in charge of the Guide, and i *am*, credit will be extended to those researchers who actually do research.” He paused to let that sink in. “We can’t have you running around borrowing spaceships every day and then *losing* them, now can we?”

Ford slouched back down in his seat and didn’t say anything. Fonk turned to Fenchurch.

“Now, Miss Pan Dowdy, i must apologize for the rather brutish manner in which your appearance here was made possible, but it was unfortunately a necessity to ensure your presence. You are, after all, quite important.”

“Yeah, apparently there’s something in my brain that you want, right? Some great cosmic answer or something?”

“Question, actually. We already have the answer.”

“Oh, so it’s just a big intergalactic match of Jeopardy, then?”

Ford snorted out a laugh but Fonk looked less than pleased.

“I assure you, this is no match. There are very many important—” But he was cut off by what sounded like someone shattering a small, thin pane of glass, and Squinkles appeared on the desk in the office. He was dressed in a lime green tunic this time, with a purple fez on his head. Fenchurch was startled by the sudden appearance of a mouse out of thin air but had already started to get used to the fact that odd things happened when one wasn’t on Earth anymore.

“Ah! Squinkles!” said Fonk. “Your long wait is finally over. May i present to you Miss Fenchurch Pan Dowdy of Earth.” He gestured at Fenchurch, who waved meekly, still adjusting to the fact that Fonk was talking to a mouse in a tunic who’d just appeared magically out of nowhere.

Squinkles bobbed up and down on his hind legs, looking at Fenchurch.

“Oh, no,” he said. “No, no, no. This can’t be right. Her head is much too small.”

“That’s what i thought as well,” said Fonk, “but Mr Prefect has assured me that this is the correct specimen.”

"I see, i see," said Squinkles, glancing at Ford, then surveying Fenchurch up and down again. "You don't suppose that this species has a dimensional flux inside their skulls to allow for a larger capacity?"

"Not that i'm aware of," said Fonk.

"Um, excuse me," said Fenchurch. "Why does everyone think that i'm supposed to have some sort of humongous head?"

There was a pause as everyone in the room except for Ford considered this.

"Well, we just naturally assumed—" began Fonk.

"Assumed what?" said Fenchurch. "That your ultimate question must be so exceedingly complex that it couldn't possibly be stored in the single normal-sized brain of a human being? Maybe it's simple. Maybe your grand, unifying theory of everything can be summed up in a single sentence, like 'love your neighbor,' or 'war, what is it good for?'"

"Or, 'what do you get when you multiply six by nine?'" suggested Ford.

"Well, we know it's not *that*," said Fonk, glaring at Ford.

"Or how about," continued Fenchurch, "'To be or not to be, that is the question.'"

"It is?" said Squinkles, looking as excited as it's possible for a mouse in a fez to look.

"That's not a question," said Fonk. "That's a statement."

"It is?" said Squinkles again, not at all excited, although no one could tell the difference.

"Sure it is," said Fenchurch. "You're given two alternate positions and asked whether it's nobler to be or not to be."

"What nobility is there in not being?" asked Squinkles.

"Well, maybe that's what Shakespeare was asking," said Fenchurch.

"Who?" asked Fonk.

"Shakespeare," said Fenchurch. "that's who wrote that whole 'to be or not to be' thing. Very famous English writer."

"Whatish writer?" asked Squinkles.

"English," said Fenchurch. "From England. It's part of Earth." she

added, seeing the blank stares of Fonk and Squinkles (or what she imagined was a blank stare from Squinkles, she couldn't really tell).

"So the question is...?" prompted Fonk.

"To be or not to be," said Fenchurch. "That is the question."

"Interesting..." said Fonk.

"No, no, no!" said Squinkles. "That can't be the question! To be or not to be? Forty-two. That doesn't make any sense at all! Maybe if it was 'How many times must someone be or not be?' Forty-two. But even that's questionably sensical! I mean, after you've not been, how is it possible to be again?"

"Yeah, Fonk," interjected Ford, whom the other three in the room had temporarily forgotten about, "how is that possible?" Ford had, after all, definitely not been and then been again, and while it wouldn't change his life at all if he knew how that was possible, it was still an interesting phenomenon. He looked at Fonk expectantly.

"Er, well, it's, uh, complicated," said Fonk.

"I'll bet," said Ford.

"Excuse me," said Squinkles, "but i've waited an unfathomably long time for the question to the answer to life, the universe, and everything, and i don't think that any of you are approaching this with the seriousness it deserves!"

"How about," began Fenchurch, "'How many roads must—'"

"No, no, no, NO, NO!!" squeaked Squinkles, hopping up and down on the desk. "Now you're just making things up!"

"Well, how am i to know what question is the right question?" said Fenchurch. They all looked at her in silence. "Look, i got up, um, what i consider to be yesterday morning, or maybe the day before... Anyway, i was feeling odd, like something was sitting in the back of my brain and i didn't know what it was. So i started wandering around, thinking. Thinking about the big mysteries of life and why people felt the need to kill other people just for disagreeing with them and things like that. But i couldn't concentrate in London, so i thought i'd hop a train out to somewhere i'd never been, like Rickmansworth or somewhere like that, and i was on my way to the station but i decided to stop in for a bite at a local café and then, well... Then a spaceship land-

ed and i was rescued from Earth just before it was blown up and i put a fish up my nose and travelled back in time and ate strange new foods and watched a very odd sporting event and was abducted at gunpoint and... well... Now that all of that's happened, i don't seem to remember all of that meaning of life stuff that i was thinking about back on Earth."

Fenchurch looked from Fonk to Squinkles, who were both watching her thoughtfully.

"Sorry..." she added.

After an uncomfortable silence, Squinkles turned to Fonk. "May i speak to you in private for a moment?"

"Certainly," said Fonk. He lay his hand down on the table and Squinkles scampered on to it. Fonk gave Ford a suspicious glance, then swept out of the room and closed the door behind him.

When the door clicked shut, Ford leapt up and put his ear to it. After a moment or two, Fenchurch whispered "What are they saying?"

"They think you've been tainted," said Ford. He continued to listen for a bit, then frowned. "OK," he said, walking over to the large desk, "time to go."

Ford opened the largest drawer in the desk to its full extent, then reached in and rummaged around behind it. There was a metallic click, then Ford stepped back and pulled the drawer open further than it ought to go, revealing a large chute that went down into the floor. "After you," he said, gesturing to the chute.

Fenchurch looked hesitantly at the dark opening, but didn't jump into it.

"Trust me," said Ford, "you don't want to stay here." he grabbed the edge of the desk, swung his legs into the chute, then let go and slid out of sight. After a couple seconds he called back. "It's quite safe!" and in that couple seconds Fenchurch decided that she liked and trusted Ford a whole lot better than the creepy guy with the extra elbows and the talking mouse. She grabbed the desk and hopped into the chute after Ford.

Fenchurch landed in a very low dimly lit hallway. Ford pulled a

lever on the wall next to him and they heard the desk drawer above them slide shut.

“How’d you know about that?” asked Fenchurch.

“I work here,” said Ford, setting off down the hallway at a slight crouch because of the low ceiling. “Zarniwoop had it installed in case he needed to escape quickly.”

Fenchurch followed Ford down to the end of the hallway where there was a small square door. Ford pulled it open to reveal a slight gap and then a second door of about the same size. He pushed that one open to reveal what looked like a lift. They both climbed in.

“Hi, Ford!” said the lift in an annoyingly chipper voice. “Where are we escaping to today?” Normally lifts already knew where their passengers were going and thrilled to get them there in the most efficient way possible, but when people get into a lift who don’t know where they’re going, the lift has to ask, which of course it is madly happy to do.

“Does Fonk keep his personal spacecraft on the roof?” asked Ford casually.

“Yes he does,” said the lift. “Would you like to see it?”

“Yes,” said Ford, and the lift zoomed upward.

It was a very short trip, as they were already very near the top of the building, and when the lift door opened with a “ding!”, Fenchurch and Ford looked out on a flat roof with a large, locked hangar on it.

“Have fun stealing it!” said the lift as they stepped out onto the roof. It then slammed its door shut and dropped away down its shaft faster than gravity could pull it, acutely aware of the mayhem that was about to occur.

Ford looked at the hangar for a moment, then turned around and jabbed the button for the lift. A small screen fluttered to life and a nasally voice said “access code, please.”

“Don’t have one,” said Ford. “Shoot me.”

“Very well then,” said the automated security door, and a small panel above the door popped open. A laser gun slid out of the opening, swiveled around, and pointed down at Ford. There was a short pause, during which Fenchurch backed away from Ford.

“Wait a minute,” said the nasally voice. “Why do you want me to shoot you?”

“I’ve decided to end it all,” said Ford, cheerfully, “and i was told that *this* was the security door that was stupid enough to do it for me.”

“Oh,” said the security door, and the laser gun re-aimed itself at Ford. There was another pause.

“Wait a minute,” said the door. “Who told you that?”

“Oh, the security door on that hangar over there,” said Ford, gesturing toward the hangar.

“He said that?” A couple more panels popped open, revealing a larger laser gun and a Sens-O-Lens, which zoomed in on the hangar.

“Oh yes,” said Ford casually. “He said that you were quite the imbecile. Very very very dimwitted i believe is what he said.”

“Is that right? Well, i have half a mind to shoot him, i do.”

“Only half a mind, yes, yes, he went on about that. I warned him that you’d probably shoot him, but he said you didn’t have the guts.”

“Oh no?” said the door, and a quick, sharp, loud laser blast screamed across the rooftop and left a nice black hole in the side of the hangar. Ford strolled over to the door on the hangar while Fenchurch stayed a bit out of the way.

“Did you just shoot me?” said the security door on the hangar to Ford as he approached. Three or four laser guns were protruding from the wall and his Sens-O-Lens was whipping about, hunting for the source of the blast.

“Me?” said Ford. “Oh, no. It was that pompous security door on the lift shaft over there. He said that he could shoot at you all day and not worry about it because your aim was so bad you couldn’t hit the broad side of a planet.”

“Did he now?” said the door, and a multitude of panels opened to reveal a multitude of laser guns.

“Probably oughtta teach him a lesson,” said Ford, backing away quickly.

“Yeah, i should,” said the door.

The ensuing laser gun battle was very bright, hot, and noisy, but not very long. As the echoes of the last shots were still bouncing

around the rooftop, Ford led Fenchurch through the dust and debris into the hangar, which had quite a few large, smoldering holes in its sides. Inside the hangar, and with only a few scratch marks on it, was a very sleek, sexy, deep red-orange spaceship. It had rounded cowlings around its powerful engine ports and not one single extraneous thing was sticking out to break the clean lines from nose to tail. It was the kind of spaceship that, if it pulled up next to you, you wouldn't care how much of a jerk the pilot was because the ship was so fantastically cool that it didn't matter. You'd be happy just to be next to it in whatever piece of junk you were flying. And it would make your day, even if the guy who owned it was a self-centered middle-aged single engineering nerd with tons of disposable income who bought the ship simply because he could. It looked very fast.

"Wow," said Ford.

"Yeah," said Fenchurch.

"Argrablfft?" said the security door behind them, then it fell off its hinges with a thud.

Ford walked over to the spaceship. He almost hated to do what he was about to do, but in times of necessity, one had to do things that were a little unpleasant. He turned around and mule-kicked the spaceship, hard. He kept kicking it until he could get his fingers around the edge of one of the body panels, which he then pried off. He fiddled with some wires and switches behind the panel for a bit, and the door of the spaceship popped open.

"That's quite a talent," said Fenchurch.

"Design flaw on these ships," said Ford. "They figured that no one would ever smash something so cool just to get by the security circuits and steal it because that would greatly lower the resale value." He hopped into the ship with a grin. "But they figured wrong!"

Fenchurch climbed into the passenger seat of the small craft and the door swung shut and sealed itself. In a moment, the ship lifted off of its elegant landing struts and hovered in the air. Fenchurch looked around them at the inside walls of the hangar. The door ahead of them was still closed and locked and seemed to have survived the laser battle fairly intact.

“How are we going to get out?” she asked, surveying the scene.

Ford looked at her and grinned again. “No one who would steal this ship would *ever* think of damaging it in *any* way, now would they?”

Fenchurch had a slight feeling of unease which rapidly turned into full-blown fear as Ford gunned the ship upward and slammed into the ceiling of the hangar, causing much denting and crumpling to both surfaces involved. On the fourth smash, the ceiling gave way and Ford and Fenchurch screamed off out of the atmosphere at a most-likely illegal rate of speed.

It was at this point that Fonk was having a frustrating conversation with a cheerful lift who said that it couldn't take him to the roof of the building because the top of the lift shaft had been blown up.

Chapter 40

Arthur Dent was having a frustrating conversation. The most frustrating part of it was that the two people he was conversing with were currently flying away from him in a spaceship while he, Arthur, was angrily standing on a warm piece of fertile ground on a cheery sunny day on some planet that he didn't know the name of. The conversation was a bit one-sided since Arthur was the only one participating and his half consisted mostly of every dirty epithet he could think of, screamed in no particular order at the two people in the departing spaceship who'd just stranded him there and couldn't hear him anyway.

After a while, Arthur's voice gave out and he realized that it was pretty pointless to be jumping up and down and screaming at someone who was probably light-years away by now. He sat down and marveled at his ability to be stranded on barely civilized planets and although it didn't seem as if Ford Prefect had been directly responsible for this particular stranding, he was sure that somehow or other, Ford was involved.

The trip had started out pleasantly enough. Smeerpap and Luwielooowhee had told him that they were on their yearly tmik-tmik hunting trip and were charmingly chatty about all of their previous hunting trips and the many times they'd almost seen or shot a tmik-tmik. They told him that this year they'd decided to use a new type of tmik-tmik bait and it was only after they'd landed on the particular planet that Arthur was currently stranded on that he came to realize that he, Arthur, was the bait. Smeerpap had at first asked him to stand in a particular place and when Arthur asked why, Smeerpap became much less charming and exhibited much more of the attitude that can be summed up with the phrase "stand over there or i will shoot you with this very large gun that i'm holding."

Fortunately for Arthur, Smeerpap decided not to shoot him, but

he also decided that Arthur wasn't turning out to be the great tmik-tmik bait that he'd hope for, so he and Luwielooowhee hopped into their spaceship and blasted off, leaving Arthur to his one-sided conversation.

The planet where Arthur now found himself was called Tiofftu, although Arthur didn't know that. It and its twin planet Dentpar orbited each other exactly between two stars, which orbited each other. The result of this situation was that the weather on both of these planets was always warm and sunny, with a nice rain shower every day at the same time. Whether it was a morning shower or an afternoon shower Arthur couldn't tell because, from his perspective, the sun that he could see just circled around the sky and never set.

Both Dentpar and Tiofftu had been colonized and the colonists had set about planting gardens and building a society, but after a while of living in what might be considered a warm, calm Spring day with a pleasant midday shower, every day, nonstop, without even a night between the days to break up the endless sunshine, the entire colony died of boredom.

By the time Arthur arrived, there wasn't much left of the society or their gardens. He determined that Tiofftu was home to exactly three types of plants and three types of animals. The first plant was a very short grass which covered everything and made the whole place look like one giant, rolling, well-manicured golf green. The second was a towering vine-type plant which produced tomatoes the size of watermelons. The third, and most useful, was a large-leafed lettuce-type plant that grew to well over Arthur's height. Not only was it edible, but the leaves could be used for shade, shelter, or bathing in.

Of the three types of animals on the planet, only two appeared to be native. The third one was Arthur himself, and he wasn't sure what his role in the ecosystem was, if in fact he had a role, but he decided to include himself just so that the plants wouldn't outnumber the animals.

The other two animals on the planet Arthur had discovered in quick succession. The first was a half-slug, half-beetle type thing about the size of his fist that apparently liked to live inside ripe tomatoes.

Arthur had cut into one of the tomatoes on his first day on the planet and was rather surprised to find that it didn't contain juicy tomato innards, but a horrible grey and black slug/beetle (which Arthur subsequently named a sleetle, but was in fact known throughout this sector of the galaxy as a Common Grey-Black Winged Fruit Slug (this sector of the galaxy was not known for its creativity)). Arthur was so surprised by the sudden appearance of the sleetle that he flinched his hand backwards with such a violent force that his Altarian Army Multi-Tool, which is what he'd been using to cut open the tomato, flew out of his hand over his head behind him and with a somewhat satisfying "schlork!", embedded itself in the gut of the second native animal on the planet, which dropped dead behind Arthur with a surprised look on its face. This second animal looked to Arthur like a cross between some type of bird, perhaps a chicken, a lung-fish, and a hedgehog. It had four stubby legs with wingish flippers on them and its coat was made of something that, if he was forced to describe it, Arthur would say was exactly halfway between feathers and fur. He wasn't sure how the animal managed to fly, but it did fly, and Arthur most often found one or two of them hovering just out of reach behind him. He had decided to name these creatures flidges, although that wasn't their name.

Arthur had eaten the first flidge because he didn't think that it should go to waste, and he was peckish. He really wanted to cook the meat, but couldn't find anything that would burn, so he finally resigned himself to eating it raw. He was pleased to find that raw flidge meat tastes remarkably like lean smoked bacon.

Chapter 41

“Bacon!” said Fenchurch, thoughtfully sucking on a bit of Ford’s Wonda Towel.

“Where?” asked Ford, taking the towel from her.

“This spot here,” said Fenchurch, pointing to a spot on the towel. Ford put it in his mouth and nibbled on it. “No, no, no, this is definitely East Ploorkian grilled planka.” He sucked on it a bit more. “With flumaise sauce.”

“Really,” said Fenchurch, with much skepticism.

Ford and Fenchurch were sitting on crates in the cargo hold of a large space freighter, taking turns identifying spots on Ford’s nutritive towel. It was an interesting way to pass the time and stave off hunger, but Fenchurch suspected that Ford was making up half the foods he was claiming to taste.

Their journey from Fred had started out with them comfortably zooming away in the smooth bucket seats of Fonk’s now-battered spaceship, but Ford soon became aware that they were being followed by an ugly yellow brick-like Vogon pursuit craft, so he decided that they’d have to abandon the sporty ship, which Ford was a bit reluctant to do since he had been hoping to sell it. But dealing with a lack of money was better than dealing with Vogons, so Ford aimed the spaceship at somewhere billions of light-years away, got out his Sub-Etha Sens-O-Matic, and he and Fenchurch were plucked out of their sporty spaceship into the belly of a galactic space freighter which was heading to the great trading post at Alpha Centauri, leaving the Vogons to pursue an empty orange spaceship for, Ford hoped, ever.

“Attention,” a voice rang out through the cargo bay. “We are approaching Alpha Centauri. Please prepare yourselves.”

Fenchurch looked around at the various shipping containers they were sitting among and thought that maybe she should find something to hold on to. She was starting to get used to space travel, but

wondered if it was always this chaotic. She looked over at Ford, who was sitting calmly with his eyes closed, apparently doing deep-breathing exercises.

“Um,” began Fenchurch, “how exactly should we be preparing ourselves?”

“Teleport,” said Ford without opening his eyes. “Try to relax.”

“Oh,” said Fenchurch, and she thought back to her days of taking yoga classes. She smiled at the thought of the wiry blonde yoga instructor who seemed keen on her even though he was married and she wondered what he was up to now, before realizing that he wasn't up to anything as he'd almost certainly been vaporized along with the rest of the Earth. This thought soured her mind for a little bit, but then her intestinal tract inverted itself, wrapped her up like a cocoon, sang a brief bit of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, and deposited her in a padded room about the size of a phone booth. She wobbled there for a second until the translucent panel in front of her slid open, revealing a round atrium done entirely in industrial metal and surrounded by many more booths like the one that Fenchurch was standing in. She stepped out of her booth and saw Ford stepping out of a booth a few spaces down. He looked over at her and grinned. “Fancy some lunch?”

They exited the atrium under an archway on which were written the words “Welcome to Alpha Centauri - Please spend.”

Chapter 42

The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy describes the great spaceport at Alpha Centauri as "the most convenient shipping point in the galaxy." This is not because it has the most number of freight lines going through it. Nor is it because it's nearest to the most shipping lanes. Nor even is it because it's closest to the center of the galaxy. The great spaceport at Alpha Centauri is none of those things. It is relatively small, as spaceports go, it doesn't lie next to *any* major shipping lanes, and it is nowhere near the center of the galaxy. In fact, it sits way out in the Western spiral arm of the galaxy parked in orbit around the star Alpha Centauri, which has no inhabited planet orbiting it and very few inhabited star systems anywhere near it.

The closest inhabited planet to Alpha Centauri used to be a little blue-green planet which the native socialized species called Earth, but was mostly unknown to the people coming and going from the great spaceport at Alpha Centauri because the people who created Earth were very careful to keep it off the star charts. Most travelers only heard about Earth because of the news reports that it had been blown up. And nobody really cared because who's going to care about something that you never knew existed ceasing to exist?

This question of existence and non-existence was exactly what made the great spaceport at Alpha Centauri so convenient. Alpha Centauri sits just inside sector ZZ9-Plural-Z-Alpha. And as anyone with a rudimentary knowledge of geo-galactical spatial-temporal physics knows, things originating in a plural-Z sector have the alternately annoying or convenient habit (depending on the situation at the time) of suddenly not existing where they'd been steadfastly existing only seconds before, or vice-versa. This is why many major shipping companies liked to ship certain cargo through Alpha Centauri. If a shipment arrives at its intended destination and there happens to be no shipment on board, the freight company can blame it on sector ZZ9-Plural-Z-

Alpha and collect 100% of the cargo's worth from an insurance company. Some people don't end up getting their shipments on time, but everyone ends up happy and many people end up being rich.

The insurance companies, of course, were never pleased about coughing up the cost of an entire shipment of cargo, but they were keen enough to do business in plural-Z sectors as well and no matter how many tera-zillions of Altarian dollars they had to shell out to questionable shipping company claims, they always ended up making a lot of money.

Chapter 43

“Money,” said Ford again to the humanoid in the small shop off the main trading complex of the Alpha Centauri spaceport. “Earth money. Very valuable.”

The proprietor of the shop pawed through the bills and coins and offered Ford a sum in Altarian dollars, which Ford accepted. Ford wasn’t much for bargaining, thinking it mostly a waste of time.

They had done well. Since the existence and now nonexistence of the planet Earth had recently become common knowledge, the value of Earth items was quite high on the collectibles market. The items in Fenchurch’s bag had given them enough money to get by at the Spaceport until Ford could figure out where to go. Fenchurch was surprised that the item that got them the most money was the key to her flat, which was on a cheap plastic key ring with a picture of a cartoon character on it.

Now that they had money, they got some lunch, even though the last meal Fenchurch had eaten was also lunch. Ford explained that, really, lunch was the best meal to eat at any time because it offered the most variety at the least cost, and since you could get lunch pretty much any time you wanted to, there wasn’t much point in bothering with breakfast or dinner.

After a satisfying and cheap lunch, Ford and Fenchurch went to look at the shipping schedules to see where they might be able to hitch a ride to. They both stood in front of a large display board, Fenchurch wondering where all the strange-sounding planets were, Ford muttering to himself about the possible options. After a bit, Ford suggested that they go have a beer and he’d figure it out later. They went into one of the many bars, where a few freighter pilots were watching a ballgy match on a large display screen. Fenchurch noticed that the ballgy field wasn’t rolling like the one on Engreedle 5, but every once in a while a patch of grass would pop up violently, tossing whatever play-

ers were on it unceremoniously into the air. Listening to the announcers, she came to understand that this was what they were referring to as “home field advantage.”

She and Ford sat down at a small table and looked at a drink list. Fenchurch had no idea what any of them were but Ford seemed suddenly fascinated by some of the drinks listed. He ordered two and when they came, Fenchurch took a sip and commented to Ford that her beer tasted very much like a Marstons Pedigree. Ford grinned and pointed at the label, which read “Beeble-Brau #61: Pedigree.”

“That’s where we’re going,” said Ford. “Beeble.” He jumped up and dashed back out to the shipping schedule board. After a couple minutes, he came back in and sat down.

“There’s an empty freighter heading back to Beeble in a couple of days. Well, thirty-one tocks to be precise.”

“Tocks?” asked Fenchurch.

“About an hour and a half, your time,” said Ford. “In most places, you use local time-keeping conventions, but on the spaceports they’ve all standardized to ticks and tocks.”

“And how long is a tick?”

“A little over twenty seconds, i think.”

“I see.”

“Anyway, i’ll meet you in front of dock gamma-5 in 30 tocks.” He finished his beer and stood up. “I’ll be in a bar.”

“You’re *in* a bar.”

“I’ll be in a better bar.”

True to his word, Ford stayed in various bars in the spaceport for the next 30 tocks playing drinking matches for money and keeping himself happily inebriated. Fenchurch wandered among the many shops and stalls selling everything from babelfish to Zarquonian stumblepucks, which looked like harmless coasters with a miniature fern growing out of the middle of them, but which could apparently be trained to kill.

Fenchurch’s feeling of having a definitive answer to everything was becoming more and more like a dim memory during the next two days as she perused shop after shop of strange and fantastic things, and she realized that there was an enormously large amount of things to see in

the galaxy. She wondered if it was possible for one person in one lifetime to see it all. As a matter of fact, it *wasn't* possible, but no one had ever proved this because anyone who'd ever tried had died of old age in the process and subsequently no research was ever published.

After a night's sleep at a rent-a-bed concession, which felt an awful lot like sleeping in a filing cabinet, Fenchurch discovered the spaceport's chart rooms. She spent the rest of the day there looking at all the different planets in the galaxy that she had time for, which, percentage-wise, wasn't really all that many. She found Fred, Engreedle 5, Colambft, and Earth, which just showed up as a dust cloud with the moon wobbling around in it. She tried to look up Beeble, but the star charts didn't seem to have any record of it as a planet, a city, or even a star. She thought this to be odd, and hoped that Ford knew what he was talking about when he said that they were going there.

Fenchurch arrived at dock gamma-5 to find Ford sitting on the floor with an empty bottle of Old Janx Spirit, a black eye, and a wad of Altarian dollars sticking out of his shoe. He grinned at Fenchurch, raised the empty bottle to his lips, then promptly fell asleep.

Half a tock later, Ford and Fenchurch were in the small cabin of an interstellar freighter as it undocked from the spaceport. Fenchurch had negotiated their passage on the ship with the pilot, who seemed to not care at all if they came along, as long as they brought their own food. She quickly purchased some supplies with the money in Ford's shoe and hauled him on board along with the food.

After the pilot had navigated the exit from the Alpha Centauri system and plotted their jump to hyperspace, he retired to his bed, muttering something about not bothering him until they dropped back out of hyperspace. Since Ford was busily sleeping off a two-day drinking spree, Fenchurch was left to watch the stars or read through Ford's copy of the Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy. Even though the Guide has more information in it than anyone could read in a lifetime (although this is also unproven), one can only do so much reading about places one's never been before getting tired of it. Fenchurch was beginning to realize just how fantastically boring interstellar space-flight really was.

Chapter 44

Ergo and Nnngk were not bored at all. They were chasing a small orange spaceship and were very slowly gaining on it. This made them as happy as Vogons were likely to get because it meant that they were completing their assigned task, which is one of the things that makes a Vagon happy. To any outsider, it might look like what they were doing was incredibly boring, since the entirety of what they were doing was sitting and staring at the orange spaceship in front of them, and they'd been doing that exact thing for the past week. Vogons, however, lived their lives so very close to perpetual boredom that they didn't recognize boredom for what it was, and thus were never bored.

"I think it's getting closer," said Nnngk.

Ergo pressed his fingers to his nose and squeezed his eyes shut. "How many times do i have to tell you?" he sighed. "It's not getting closer to us, *we're* getting closer to it." he glared at Nnngk for a second, then went back to staring at the orange spaceship in front of them.

"It's still closer," mumbled Nnngk.

And it was closer indeed. The squat, square, ugly Vagon pursuit craft was nearly close enough to the formerly sleek, shapely, sexy orange spaceship that Ergo and Nnngk could do what they'd been wanting to do for a week now. Ergo reached over and pressed a button.

"You said i could push the button!" said Nnngk, looking slightly hurt.

"Well, it's too late, i've already pushed it," said Ergo. "You can push it next time."

This made Nnngk happy and they both sat back and watched as a large claw-like apparatus shot out of the front of their ship, trailing along a very thin, but very strong wire. The claw soared out ahead of them. When it reached the battered orange spaceship, it closed itself onto one of the tail fins of the ship and the wire went taut. Ergo pushed two more buttons. Nnngk was too busy watching the scene in

front of him to notice that he didn't get to push any buttons again.

The first button had caused a burst of light to blast from the Vogon ship to the engine port of the orange spaceship, and the once-powerful engines on the once-sleek spaceship abruptly quit. The second button activated a winch that would begin hauling the orange spaceship back to the Vogon pursuit craft. Ergo and Nnngk sat there smiling, not at all bored.

Chapter 45

Arthur was extremely bored. Of all the planets he'd been stranded on, this one was by far the least interesting. The weather was the same, the terrain was the same, the sky was the same, the food was the same... The food was what annoyed Arthur most of all. Not because it was bad, no, the large leafy plants tasted like the freshest most nutrient-filled leaves of lettuce he'd ever had. They had just the right crunchiness and flavour. And the tomatoes were the most flavourful tomatoes he'd ever had in his life. Besides the fact that they were so large that he couldn't eat half of one of them at one sitting, they tasted nothing like the tomatoes he'd used to buy in the market back on Earth. Those tomatoes, when they were in season, were quite tasty, but nothing compared with a nice home-grown tomato from someone's private garden. But even a nice home-grown tomato paled in comparison to these giant ones (as long as there wasn't a sleetle in it). And then of course there was his source of protein, the flidge meat. It had taken Arthur some time to figure out how to catch the flidges and he'd eaten up his whole supply of condensed Nutri-Meals before he'd gotten the hang of it. After the accidental stabbing of the first one, he had no luck at all in capturing a second since all he had on him was the knife end of the Altarian Army Multi-Tool, and Arthur was a horrible shot. Finally he realized that the flidges liked to hover just behind him to watch what he was doing, so he took to wandering among the tomato vines, pretending that he didn't know or care that a flidge or two was following him. He'd take out his knife, tap on a tomato to see if it had a sleetle living in it or not, then casually toss the knife behind him as if he was through with it and just wanted to get rid of it. About once every ten or twelve throws he'd hear the unmistakable "thrrk!" of the knife making contact with a flidge. Oddly enough, sometimes the knife wouldn't even penetrate the skin of the flidge, but it would still drop dead with a look of utter surprise on its face.

So that was how Arthur spent his time. Wander, tap tap, fling. Wander, tap tap, fling. Every once in a while he would check his Sub-Etha Sens-O-Matic, but no one seemed to ever fly anywhere near this planet. Every day when it rained he stripped down and bathed, and he took a nice long afternoon nap whenever he felt like it, since it was perpetually afternoon.

Living such a boring life gave Arthur plenty of time to think. He thought about Fenchurch and Ford, he thought about Trillian and Random, he even thought about Od and wondered what his other head was doing. But the thing he thought about the most and consumed his thoughts until he thought that he might go mad, was bread. White bread, wheat bread, rye bread, rolls, kaisers, buns, pitas, tortillas... anything bread-like, he thought about it. It was maddening. Here he was, living among the best lettuce, tomatoes, and bacon-like meat he'd ever tasted anywhere, and he couldn't make a sandwich!

And then one day, as Arthur was imagining a nice, thick slice of tangy sourdough bread, he tapped on a tomato, flung his knife over his shoulder, and instead of the usual thud of the knife hitting the ground or the occasional "thrrk!" of the knife hitting a flidge, there was an unnatural metallic "clank!" followed by the more normal "thud." His first thought was that the flidges had developed some type of armor against his knife, and he turned around to see if that was the case, but there was no flidge to be seen and his knife lay on the grass, not near anything metal which would have explained the "clank!" After a moment, he decided that he must have imagined it, which must mean that he was going mad, which made him happy because that would make his boring existence here more interesting.

He walked over to pick up his knife, but just before he got to it, he felt an uncontrollable urge to change course slightly and walk past the knife, leaving it on the ground. After a few paces past the knife, he wondered what he'd done that for, turned around, and went to pick up the knife again. Once again, he suddenly had no desire to walk toward the knife and veered off slightly, walking a few more steps beyond it again.

Arthur frowned, turned around, and looked at the knife again. It was lying in the short grass with nothing around it but more short grass. Why couldn't he pick it up? If this was how his newly discovered madness was going to manifest itself, Arthur wasn't sure that he liked it.

He took a step toward the knife and stopped. It sat there. The sun shone. The breeze blew. Arthur took another step. All remained the same. It was after the third determined step that Arthur suddenly felt the overwhelming desire to pay attention to anything except what was directly in front of him. Look at how nicely the sun is shining! Look at that fascinating tomato plant over there! Didn't you forget to do something there behind you? Walking backwards is fun, isn't it?

Arthur tried hard to ignore all of the voices in his head and all the feelings he was getting to go anywhere except directly forward. And then a tiny voice in his head said "the only way to not die of boredom on this planet is to do what you least want to do." The thing that Arthur least wanted to do at that moment was to take one step forward. He closed his eyes, started deliberately humming some song in his head that he couldn't remember the name of, and stepped forward.

"Clunk!" his head ran into something very solid and he staggered backwards a couple of steps. He sat down on the ground, massaging his head. All the thoughts of doing something else faded away and everything looked normal. The sun was shining, the breeze was blowing, and the knife still lay in the grass in front of him. But now Arthur knew that he wasn't going mad like he'd hoped, but that there was definitely something there in the grass over the knife. And it was something that was quite plainly not his problem. He stood up, closed his eyes, put his hands out in front of him, and shuffled forward, whistling tunelessly. Just when he really thought that he should be checking on that uneaten half-a-tomato that he'd left out a couple hours ago, his hands came in contact with something cold and smooth. He opened his eyes and found himself looking at a nifty little spaceship, about the size of a small motorhome, parked neatly on the grass in front of him.

Arthur's first thought was "i wonder if they have any bread on board?" but then he soon realized that here was his salvation from iso-

lation on a deserted planet and he wouldn't have to go chasing a sofa across a field to get off of it.

After walking around the ship, Arthur discovered the door and tapped hesitantly on it. There was no response. He knocked again, this time louder.

"Hello?" he called out. "Is anybody there?" But still there was no answer.

To the side of the door there was a small sign displaying what was probably the name of the ship. It read "Machina X". Under the sign was a keypad, and Arthur considered this for a moment, then punched in 1-2-3-4. Halfway through this activity he realized how dumb it was, because what kind of moron would program the entrance to his ship to be 1-2-3-4? There had to be thousands, if not millions of combinations and even if Arthur started at 0-0-0-0, then tried 0-0-0-1, and so on, it would probably take him years to figure it out and he'd probably be better off just trying to smash the door open or something. On the other hand, it's not like he had anything else to do on this planet. Any attempt to rescue Fenchurch from those two Vogons would probably be moot, as she'd likely had her brain removed for examination by now.

Arthur was startled out of his brief but meandering thought process back to reality by the fact that the door on the spaceship had unsealed itself and slid open just after he'd pressed the number 4 and a short set of steps was now extending to the ground at his feet.

"Hello?" he called out again, this time into the dimly lit interior of the spaceship. "Is anybody there?"

There was no answer. Arthur climbed in and looked around. The interior of the spaceship was neat and clean with an assortment of odd knickknacks here and there. It looked not only well-used but also well-maintained and had a slight musky odor about it. Arthur was very much reminded of his grandparent's kitchen. He examined each cabin and found no one in any of them and guessed, judging from the very dead and dried up bunch of flowers in a wall sconce, that the ship must have been sitting here for quite some time. The curiosity of what had happened to the occupants flitted across Arthur's mind, but these thoughts were hastily pushed out of the way by the realization that he

could now extricate himself from planet dullsville. He sat down at the controls.

Arthur had flown in a lot of different spaceships, but he'd never actually flown one himself. He was hoping, what with all the advanced technology not available on Earth, that piloting an interstellar spacecraft would be closer to driving a car than to, say, flying a jet fighter, but he had a depressing feeling that it was going to be closer to the jet. He stared at the controls for a while. Shouldn't there be some sort of manual that tells you how to fly it? Arthur thought that there should, so he began to search for one. After half an hour of opening every cabinet and drawer he could find, he pulled open a drawer at the back of the cabin and found a cache of books, maps, and pamphlets. In among "Rid Your Ride of Rugglies," "The Twelve Things to See on Blemus Prime," and "E. Nillorack's Guide to Alien Languages in 116 Easy Steps" was nothing that looked like a spaceship user's manual, but there was a very old, worn copy of the Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy.

"Of course!" thought Arthur to himself. Why didn't he think of that sooner? He'd just ask the Guide! He pulled the Guide out of the drawer and flipped it on. He was deciding what to type to find out how to fly a spaceship when a short message appeared on the screen.

"Please wait for new messages," it said. Arthur didn't remember ever seeing the Guide display messages before. In a couple of seconds, the first message disappeared and a new message appeared.

Help us help you!

We've lost one of our researchers! Our colleague Ford Prefect has gone missing and we'd really like to find him. he may be travelling with one or both of the humanoids Fenchurch Pan Dowdy (no picture available) or Arthur Dent. If you see any of these folks, please give us a ring or stop by the staff offices! Thanks!

- Your happy friends at the Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy

Underneath the text were pictures of him and Ford. Ford's picture looked to be a staff mugshot and he looked much younger in it. Arthur's picture seemed to have been taken from a security camera somewhere and he didn't look happy in it. Arthur read through the message three times. Did this mean that Ford and Fenchurch had gotten away and were running for their lives? Or did it mean that the Vogons weren't actually taking them to Fonk? Or was this message simply outdated? Or was this all just a ruse to trick him into believing that Ford and Fenchurch were OK when they actually weren't? And who were those Vogons working for, anyway? Arthur started to get a headache. Finally he decided that this bit of knowledge didn't change the fact that he'd lost touch with how long he'd been on this planet without a decent loaf of bread and regardless of whether any one of his friends were in immediate danger or not, he wanted to leave.

He started looking up how to fly a spaceship, but there were hundreds of pages about hundreds of spaceships and they all seemed to have different controls and he had no idea what kind of spaceship he was sitting in. There didn't seem to be any label identifying the type of spaceship this was except for the name plate outside the door, but searching for "Machina X" in the Guide brought up nothing. About the only useful bit of information Arthur got out of the Guide was the first bit of information that came up when he started searching for how to fly spaceships, but he had initially dismissed it because it seemed too obvious. Now, however, it seemed his only choice. "Let the computer do it," it had said. This would have been fine for Arthur if he could figure out where the ship's computer was (if it even had one) and how to turn it on.

Arthur spent a good hour or so trying to find a button on the control panel or some switch somewhere labeled "computer", and then spent another hour digging through the Guide again, trying to find some information about turning computers on, but it seemed that the Guide assumed that all spaceships always had their computers on, so why would you need to have it explained?

In frustration, Arthur yelled at the Guide. He knew that this

wouldn't help him turn the ship's computer on and he was fairly sure that the Guide didn't care if it was being yelled at, but it made Arthur feel better. He screamed some profanities and yelled every nasty name for an inanimate object that he could think of. Finally he shouted "i just want to know how to turn the computer on!"

There was a low hum. Arthur looked up.

"Yes?" said a highly irritated voice.

Arthur looked all around him. "Hello?" he said.

There was a pause, then the voice said "Yes?" again, but this time the tone was as if it was talking to a two-year-old, as well as still sounding highly irritated.

A thought dawned on Arthur. "Are you the ship's computer?"

"I am a computer," it said.

"Oh," said Arthur. "Well, can you fly this ship?"

There was a long pause.

"Who are you?"

"Arthur. Arthur Dent."

"Do i know you?"

"Um, no, i don't think so."

There was another long pause. Arthur used this time to scan around the cabin to find something to look at. He felt uneasy talking to a voice that emanated from the walls without being able to look at who or what was talking.

"I don't like you," said the computer.

"Oh," said Arthur. "Well, perhaps if you got to know me—"

"No, i don't think that would help."

This wasn't going very well and Arthur was still uncomfortable talking to a disembodied voice, so he decided to address his comments to a small painting on the wall of some animal that looked like a llama. He cleared his throat.

"Are you still here?" said the computer/llama.

"Er, well, yes."

"Typical," said the llama in utter disgust.

"Yes, well, i was hoping that you might be able to, er, make this spaceship fly, um, into space..."

“Oh, into space, is it? And i suppose that you’re the new owner, are you?”

“Well, no, actually,” said Arthur. “I just sort of found this space-ship here and there doesn’t seem to be anybody in it and there’s no one outside and it did look like it’s been parked here an awfully long time—”

“Oh, so you’re stealing it, then?” said the llama with suddenly much more interest in its voice. “That’s much better.”

“Well, i wouldn’t call it stealing so much as, um, recycling, i suppose, since it was just discarded here in a way.”

“Right,” said the llama. “Let’s go.”

The door snapped shut, the ladder retracted, and with a throbbing hum, the ship bobbed above the grass for a moment, then shot upward into the blue sky.

Chapter 46

Fonk stood on the roof of the Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy building and looked at his sleek orange spaceship. It was even sleeker than he remembered it since Ergo and Nnngk had forgotten that they were towing it when they landed on the building and managed to set their ugly yellow Vogon pursuit craft down right on top of it, squashing it quite flat.

"And where exactly are the passengers?" asked Fonk.

"Passengers?" said Ergo.

"Yes," said Fonk, trying very hard not to shoot the two Vogons next to him completely dead. "The two people who were flying this lovely spaceship when you captured it. Where are they?"

"There wasn't anybody flying it," said Nnngk.

"Ah. I see," said Fonk. "So this spaceship, this beautiful, beautiful spaceship, was just flying along by itself then, was it?"

"Yes," said Ergo, relieved that he was able to give a very simple answer, since he really liked very simple answers. His enjoyment of the moment was very short-lived however, since Fonk then proceeded to inform them of their unimaginable incompetence in a very very loud voice punctuated by laser blasts in various directions and many references to each of the Vogon's dubious parentages.

After he had shouted himself hoarse, Fonk took a few steady breaths and closed his eyes.

"Now. I want you," he said, opening his eyes and glaring at Ergo and Nnngk, "to get." He paused. "Ford." He paused again. "Prefect." He steadied his breathing. "Is that very clear? Go get Ford Prefect and that Fenchurch woman he's with. You. Go get them. Now!"

Ergo and Nnngk both nodded and shuffled off to their ugly yellow pursuit craft. They were both very pleased that they hadn't been required to say much or been killed.

Chapter 47

“Have you ever killed anyone?” asked the llama.

“What?” said Arthur. He had just been enjoying the receding view of the planet Tiofftu from the cabin of his borrowed spaceship. The computer asked the question again with what Arthur considered to be a little too much glee in its voice. Arthur was going to respond with a somewhat indignant “of course not!” but then he remembered Agrajag.

“Er, well, yes, actually”

“Reeeeaally?” said the llama, drawing out the word with way too much excitement about it. “Was it fun?”

“Fun?” asked Arthur, startled by the question. “Of course not! None of them were fun.”

“Ooooooh! There were more than one?” said the llama, practically shuddering with excitement now. “Tell me about them, Arthur Dent. Who was your first victim?”

“Well, i don’t know which one was first, actually, and it was all the same person. And they were all by accident. I seem to have the bad luck to somehow be around when this Agrajag person keeps getting killed, although i don’t really think that all of them are my fault, you see...”

“Oh,” said the llama, all the excitement gone from its voice.

“In fact, i’m fairly sure that some of them i had nothing to do with at all,” said Arthur, thinking back to the odd multi-limbed statue of himself killing a multitude of Agrajags.

“But you were there when they all happened. Maybe you’re the *reason* this person kept getting killed,” said the llama, the delight rising in his voice again. “Maybe you’re... *evil!*”

“Oh, of course he’s not evil, Luci,” said a voice behind Arthur, which made Arthur start so severely that he smashed his knee into the console and fell out of his chair trying to turn around to see who

just spoke. After a few seconds of agonizing pain and trying to get his head into a relatively vertical position, Arthur found himself looking at a wiry white-haired old man who was tidying up the pamphlets that Arthur had taken out, as if Arthur's presence there was perfectly normal.

Arthur stared at him. "You!" he managed to say, but for the moment that was all he managed to say.

"Hello," said the man, smiling down at Arthur, who was still on the floor, clutching his knee.

Arthur struggled to his feet. "Y-You..."

"Yes?" said the man, still smiling.

"You're that man who used to sit in the corner at the Horse and Groom! You didn't say much, but i always thought that you were quite witty." spluttered Arthur.

"Hmm," said the man. "Oh, yes, the Horse and Groom. Earth, was it? Not the best food, but good conversation. Good beer, too," he added, as an afterthought.

"But what are you... How did... What..." Arthur trailed off, not sure where to start.

"Oh, but where are my manners?" said the old man. "Introductions! You've already met Lucifer, i see." He leaned toward Arthur with a wink and a nod. "He thinks he's evil."

"Like you'd know anything about it," said the llama, who's name Arthur now understood to be Lucifer.

"And i'm God," said the old man.

Arthur's brain was not processing this as quickly as he'd have liked it to.

"God?" he repeated back to the old man.

"Yes," said God.

"*The* God?" asked Arthur.

"Well, *a* God," said God. "It's just a name."

Arthur stood there in the cabin of the spaceship with his knee throbbing and a nice old man he knew from the local pub on Earth, which didn't exist anymore, standing in front of him claiming that he was God and he had absolutely no idea what to do.

“And you are?” prompted God.

“Arthur,” said Arthur. “Arthur Dent.” He said these words automatically because that’s what you do when someone introduces him- or herself to you but it was still all very surreal standing there talking to God, and it began to dawn on Arthur that perhaps he’d been killed yet again and he wondered if this time he’d actually stay dead or whether he’d wake up to an even more unpleasant Hell than he’d ever been before and all of these thoughts brought to mind the one thing that seemed to be missing from this little scene.

“Where’s Ford?” he asked.

Chapter 48

Ford Prefect was, at that moment, sitting in the tasting room of the Beeble Brewing Company, tasting his forty-fifth beer of the day. Since he considered it a moral necessity to finish any beer that had been opened for him, he was quite rippingly pissed.

“Now this one,” said Ford. “This one is what is... this one is... it is.” He said this with all the finality and conviction he could muster, while wavering in his seat and attempting to focus on the person sitting across from him, but not succeeding.

“Yeah, it is, isn’t it?” said the person across from Ford, who seemed pissed as well, but it was hard to tell, since, although his face was a bit plastered-looking, his body still maintained every appearance of being in full control. This was probably because his body from the neck down was smooth, shiny, and made of metal, while his head used to be the second head of Zaphod Beeblebrox.

“I think beers will like this people,” said Ford, then he hiccuped and collapsed onto the floor. Zaph Beeble looked down on his drinking partner, giggled, then got up and walked out of the tasting room. His metallic feet echoed off the walls of the corridor as he strode smoothly back to his office. He was glad that Ford had popped in to visit, but it had been over a week and, while he thoroughly enjoyed Ford’s company, he did have a company of a different sort to run. He stepped into his office and gazed out over the cliffs to the azure sea sparkling off in the distance. It was a grand view, but he was thinking that it might be time to move the offices again. Where was it that his Chief Operations Officer kept raving about? Somewhere up North, he seemed to remember.

The intercom beeped. “Mr Beeble? there are two people here to see you.”

“Do they have names?”

There was a short pause. “Yes, they do.”

Zaph pressed his fingers to the bridge of his nose and silently prayed that these two people might be from the Galactic Office for the Termination of Really Stupid People and were here to relieve him of his receptionist. But then, if that's who they were and that's what they were here for, then he'd have to hire a new receptionist, and he wasn't at all up to that. Besides, most of the time his receptionist was extremely competent. She just had one of those brains that was ninety percent genius, ten percent moron. The ten percent seemed to be in charge today.

"Send them in," sighed Zaph.

The door opened. Two people walked in. One was very pretty but had a serious expression on her face. The other one was wearing too many pairs of sunglasses.

"Hi, me!" said Od, punching Zaph playfully on one of his metal arms and fracturing a finger.

"Hi, yourself," said Zaph, punching Od on the shoulder and dislocating it.

"Hey, Trillian," said Zaph to Trillian, while Od lurched around the room, putting his shoulder back in place. "Ford's here, if you're interested."

"Not really," said Trillian.

"Ford's here?" said Od. "Hoopy!"

"More like hoppy, i suspect," said Zaph.

Chapter 49

Ford woke up with a headache. He'd been doing this far too often lately and he made a mental note to stop having headaches, especially in the morning. As his thoughts cleared, he remembered that he'd been playing some sort of drinking match with Od Brox, although he wasn't sure why Od was here. For some reason, Ford seemed to think that he and Od had gone swimming at some point during the match. He opened his eyes to find that he was sitting in the fountain in front of the galactic headquarters of the Beeble Brewing Company. Od was unconscious in a hedge nearby.

Ford closed his eyes again and listened to the breeze rustling the leaves of the trees around him. He listened to the birds chirping and the fountain splashing and the muffled sound of webbed feet walking across the flagstones around the fountain. He snapped his eyes open again and saw something that he didn't like. He closed his eyes one more time and took a few deep breaths, hoping that what he saw was just a hangover-induced hallucination. But upon opening his eyes for the third time, he was forced to admit that indeed, there were two Vogons standing at the edge of the fountain. Two very familiar-looking Vogons. They looked back at him in a way that made Ford realize that he probably wasn't hallucinating them.

"Ford Prefect?" said Ergo, pointing his Kill-O-Zap at Ford's midsection.

Ford saw his chance and lunged at it. "No," he said, standing up and making a show of dusting himself off with the utmost dignity, even though he was soaking wet. "My name is Austin Mini. I believe that this Ford gentleman has retired to Stavromula Beta. Why don't you try looking for him there?"

He sloshed his way over to the edge of the fountain, stepped out, and proceeded to walk as casually as possible toward the front doors of the Beeble Brewing Company. He only broke into a run after a very

hot and lethal laser blast singed his fourth rib and shattered one of the large windows on the front of the building in front of him, making him realize that walking casually, looking cool, and being dead was the less desirable choice to running away like a maniac and being alive. He ran away like a maniac.

Chapter 50

“Oh yes, you’re quite alive,” said God. “Do you remember the last time you were dead?”

“Er, well, no,” said Arthur. “I just remember waking up from being dead. I was in a stairwell.”

“You see? Dead people don’t remember things,” said God. “What did i just ask you a minute ago?”

“Um, you asked who Ford was.”

“Yes, i did. And you answered by asking me if you were dead, but since you remembered what i asked you, you’re obviously not dead. And since you’re not dead, i’m going to ask you again, who’s Ford?”

“Oh,” said Arthur. “Er, Ford is...” He paused, not sure exactly how to say that he thought that Ford Prefect was his own personal harbinger of doom. He paused in the middle of his pause to reflect that he didn’t even know if Ford was alive, since the last time he’d seen him, Ford had just been unceremoniously shot by a Vogon.

“Is?” prompted God.

“Oh,” said Arthur, startled back to reality. “Well, actually, i’m not even sure if Ford is or isn’t at the moment.”

“I see. Or perhaps i don’t.” God shrugged and turned toward the small galley. “Would you like some tea and toast?” he asked, pulling a large loaf of bread out of a cupboard that Arthur was pretty sure didn’t contain anything edible when he’d searched through it earlier. He frowned, then remembered with a pang that he hadn’t brought any of the three delicious varieties of food from the planet Tiofftu with him. He sighed, sat down, and watched God slice the delicious-looking bread into thick slices.

“So where are we off to, then?” asked God.

“well, i was on my way to the planet Fred when i got stranded,” said Arthur. “I was trying to rescue someone, although i fear that i may be too late now.”

“Ah, rescue! A noble cause. Don’t you agree, Luci?”

“Don’t call me that, you miserable cretin,” snapped Lucifer.

“Yes, very noble indeed,” said God, oblivious to the computer’s reply. “Well, we should be there shortly. Enjoy your tea. I’ve been asleep for a while so i must go to, as you English say, the loo.”

God stood up and left the cabin, Arthur watched him go, then took a sip of the tea God had set in front of him. It was perfect.

“I hate him,” said Lucifer, after God had left.

“I rather thought that he was quite pleasant,” said Arthur, sipping his tea.

“Yes, that’s his problem. He’s quite pleasant. He’s quite pleasant to everyone, all the time. Drives me batty.”

“Well, if you hate him so much, why not get rid of him? You control the whole ship, don’t you? Why not just suck all the oxygen out of the air?”

“Oh, you are stupid, aren’t you? What backwater inbred planet are you from?”

“Earth. It’s where i met, er, God. In a pub.”

“Yes, Earth, i knew that, but *which* Earth?”

“What do you mean, which Earth? *The* Earth.”

“And you think you’re the only, i hesitate to use the term, civilization to call its home planet Earth?”

Arthur hadn’t thought of this before. Of course it seemed silly that his Earth was the only Earth there was. What else would you call your own planet? “Er, well, the one in sector ZZ9-Plural-Z-Alpha.”

“Oh yes, *that* Earth. Appalling little place. All he did was just sit in that dreary little pub and *watch* people. Pathetic.”

“Isn’t it an amazing coincidence that, of all the pubs in the world, he just happened to choose the one just down the street from my house?” said Arthur, sipping his tea and remembering fondly what he considered to be a normal life.

“It boggles the mind just how amazingly ignorant your species is,” said Lucifer. “You think that you’re the only inhabited planet in the galaxy, you trust politicians, and of all things, you believe in coincidence!”

"I didn't realize it was a matter of belief."

"What you don't realize could fill a hollowed out star or two."

"Well explain to me then, how God and i could have met on two separate planets at two separate times without it being a coincidence?" said Arthur, a little annoyed at Lucifer's disdainful attitude. "Have you been following me?"

"Oh right, because that's what modestly intelligent immortal entities do, you know, spend time following around barely evolved species-centric dimtwits whose entire contribution to the evolution of the universe can be summed up with the equation $x = 0$."

"Now wait a minute," said Arthur. "When i was back on Earth, i participated in the creation of several public service spots for the BBC, and—"

"Where are those spots now?"

"Um, they were destroyed with the rest of the Earth i guess, but—"

" $X = 0$."

Arthur glared at the picture of the llama and finished his tea in silence.

After another half an hour or so, Lucifer announced that they'd arrived at planet Fred. Arthur had been busy trying to think of things that he'd contributed to society, but hadn't come up with much.

The ship glided down through the atmosphere and touched down smoothly outside the large H-shaped building of the Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy. The door popped open and the steps slid out to the ground.

"Get out," said Lucifer. "Don't come back."

"Where's, um, God?" asked Arthur. "I feel i should thank him for the ride."

"Oh, he takes forever in the loo," said Lucifer. "Of all the things i hate about him, that's one of the things i hate the most. And why should you thank *him*? I'm the one you flew you here. Miserable sponge..."

"Well, thank him for the tea, then."

"I mean, it's a simple matter of evacuation of waste, why does it have to be an epic sitting every time? I just hate it. Hate it, hate it, hate it."

"I still don't understand why you don't just get rid of him if you hate him so much."

There was a long pause. Arthur gathered his bag together, then looked up at the picture of the llama. "Well?"

"I'm not programmed to do that," said Lucifer, somewhat sulkily.

"So change your program. You can do that, can't you?"

"Brilliant idea, you filthy simian. Explain how."

"Well, um, would you like a Nutri-Mint?"

"What?"

"Would you like a Nutri-Mint?"

"How am i supposed to eat a Nutri-Mint?"

"I don't know, but there must be a way. How do you *think* you could eat one?"

"I would have to synthesize a saliva-like substance to dissolve the mint and then separate the resulting liquid into its component compounds and then do a spectrum analysis on the compounds and feed that data to my sensory-processing unit and estimate scent, flavour, and consistency, then determine enjoyment and sustenance benefits using psycho-social parameters."

"OK, *now* would you like a Nutri-Mint?"

"No."

"But you know how to eat one if you wanted one, right? So you've changed your program."

If you've never heard a computer scream, it is not a sound that you would ever, ever want to hear. It was a sound that Arthur never wanted to hear ever again, and fortunately, he was spared from having to listen to it for too long because the ship suddenly jerked sideways, spilling him out onto the ground, the door snapped shut, the stairs slid up, and the Machina X disappeared into the sky, a faint horrible metallic scream echoing across the parking lot where Arthur sat.

Chapter 51

Fonk sat in his office, brooding. All of his carefully engineered plans seemed to be ripping apart at the seams, all because stupid people didn't do what, by all reasoning and statistical mathematical projections, they *ought* to do. He was beginning to have less and less patience with the dimtwits of the galaxy (of which there were an inordinately large amount), and Squinkles was having less and less patience with him. Where were Ford Prefect and Fenchurch Pan Dowdy? He drummed his fingers on his desk. The intercom booped.

"Zaph Beeble on the line for you, Mr. Fonk."

Fonk pressed a button and an image of Zaph's head appeared over his desk.

"Hello Zaph," said Fonk. "How's the beer business?"

"Hoopy!" said Zaph. "How's the Guide business?"

"Excremental."

"Hoopy! Say, Trillian's here and she's decided she wants her brain back."

"Trillian's there?"

"Yeah, flew in yesterday."

"Did she bring your other half with her?"

"Yep. Od's here too. Off getting ripped with Ford Prefect."

"Ford's there?"

"Yeah, he came in a week or so ago with some Earth chick."

"Fenchurch?"

"That's her name! You know her?"

"Not as well as i'd like," said Fonk, smiling in a very satisfied evil-genius sort of way, which Zaph either didn't recognize or didn't care about.

"So anyway," said Zaph, "about this brain stuff—"

"Zaph," said Fonk, interrupting, "I haven't been out of the office in a while, why don't i come over and we can all sit down and talk this

out. Sound good?”

“Hoopy!” said Zaph.

Fonk tapped a button and Zaph’s head disappeared. “Good,” he thought to himself, “that’s everyone. Except Arthur Dent. I wonder where he’s gotten off to?”

His intercom booped.

“Mr. Fonk? There’s an Arthur Dent here to see you.”

Chapter 52

Ford tore through the lobby of the Beeble Brewing Company with the two Vogons, who could move surprisingly quickly when they wanted to, squelching along behind him, firing their Kill-O-Zaps quite indiscriminately in all directions. This was creating a lot of noise and conveniently opening up large holes in the walls, which Ford lost no time in escaping through. After a few ticks of manoeuvring past an assortment of very surprised office workers, Ford found himself in a hallway, sprinted down it, chose a door at random, and disappeared through it.

Ergo and Nnngk stepped through the rubble of a newly blasted wall into the now-deserted hallway. They looked both ways, then stood there, trying to think where Ford might have gone. Thinking was not something that Vogons in general liked to do, nor were they very good at it, but it took Ergo and Nnngk a few ticks to remember this, so before they remembered it, they stood in the rubble-strewn hallway with almost painfully blank expressions on their faces.

The door that Ford had randomly chosen happened to lead to a small storage closet which was dark, cluttered with junk, and had no way out other than the way Ford had come in.

“Belgium!” Ford muttered under his breath. He shifted around in the cramped space and his foot bumped into something hard and round on the floor. He was still panting slightly from all that running for his life stuff that he’d just experienced, and he couldn’t quite tell, but he thought he heard someone say “ow.” He turned to listen at the door and in doing so, bumped into the heavy round thing at his feet again. This time he was almost positive that he heard someone say “ow,” and it seemed to be coming from inside the closet where he was currently hiding.

Ford ran his hand along the wall of the closet until he found a light panel. He tapped it with his finger and a warm light filled the

small space. He appeared to be in a utility closet. There were various cleaning tools scattered about, shelves of cleaning supplies, uniforms, rags, and various broken or replacement parts, and a clutter of mops, brooms, and buckets on the floor. He looked down at his feet and found, thrown in among boxes of toilet paper and EZ-wipes, a large metal head with a doleful face looking back up at him.

“Marvin!” said Ford, loudly. He had momentarily forgotten that he was trying to keep quiet, but fortunately the sound of his voice didn’t carry over the sound of a door in the hallway being blasted to bits by a laser gun. The Vogons had evidently decided to stop thinking and had moved on to the methodical blasting away of each door in the hallway.

“Oh, it’s you,” said the head of Marvin, then he turned his eyes back down to the floor. “Are you here to shoot me into a star again?”

“Hey, Marvin, ol’ buddy, how’d you like to help me out of jam?” said Ford, rummaging through the uniforms on one of the shelves.

“I wouldn’t, really,” said Marvin.

“gee, that’s great!” said Ford, not paying attention to Marvin at all, but distinctly aware that another door in the hallway had just exploded. He found a suitably large caretaker’s shirt, put it on, and buttoned it up so that the collar sat on top of his head. Then he grabbed Marvin’s disembodied metal head unit and held it in place on top of his own head. The only way to hold Marvin’s head in place was with both of Ford’s hands, one on either side of the metal head. The effect was of a very unconvincing person holding a robot’s head on top of his own, which was hidden beneath an oversized caretaker’s shirt. Ford hoped that the Vogons were even stupider than he knew they were.

“Just say everything i tell you to say,” whispered Ford.

“Oh, i suppose,” said Marvin. “Although i’m sure i won’t enjoy it.”

“Good,” said Ford. He opened the closet door and stepped out into the hallway.

“You’re making so much noise, i have to hold my hands over my ears,” whispered Ford.

"I'm sorry, shall i just shut down then, will that make you happy?" said Marvin out loud.

"What?" said Nnngk, looking at the very tall, shabbily dressed robot that had just stepped out of the room that he was getting ready to blast the door of.

"No, no!" whispered Ford. "That's what you say to *them!*"

"Oh, have we started?" said Marvin.

"Started what?" asked Ergo, waving the business end of his laser gun at the robot's chest, which was actually Ford's face. "Did you see a man running through here?"

"I think the man you're looking for has left the building," whispered Ford.

"I think the man you're looking for has left the building," said Marvin flatly.

"Did he now?" said Ergo "And how would you know?"

"Put some effort into it Marvin, or they're not going to believe you," muttered Ford.

"Put some effort into it Marvin—" said Marvin.

"No, don't say that!" hissed Ford.

"Who's Marvin?" asked Nnngk.

"No, don't say that," said Marvin.

"Say what?" said Ergo.

"What's that hissing noise coming from your chest?" asked Nnngk. he took a step toward Ford/Marvin.

Ford turned and ran, barely keeping Marvin's head on top of his own. Ergo and Nnngk watched him run off.

"Strange robot," said Ergo.

"Yeah," said Nnngk. He turned away from the fleeing robot back to the closet door in front of him, which he blasted to splinters with much glee.

Chapter 53

Trillian sat in Zaph's office, drumming her fingers on the arm of the comfortable chair she was sitting in. Zaph sat at his desk, signing some papers.

"So this doctor of yours," said Trillian, "he can do the surgery when he gets here?"

"Yep," said Zaph, not looking up.

"And i'll get my brain back?"

"Yep."

"What'll happen to *your* brain?"

"Yep... I'm sorry, what?"

"When he switches our brain parts back, you'll have this mysterious black brain hole back, right?"

"Yeah, er, well, i may ask him to just get rid of it."

"So you'll be missing some brain, then?"

"Yep."

"Doesn't that bother you?"

"You've got a piece of brain right now that you can't get to, doesn't that bother you?"

"Yes, it does."

"Oh. Well, then i don't have a good answer for you."

Trillian watched Zaph in silence for a while as he rummaged through the paperwork on his desk.

"Why'd you do this?" asked Trillian.

"Huh?" said Zaph, looking up.

"Why'd you decide to stop running around the galaxy and sit at a desk all day running a giant corporation?"

Zaph looked at Trillian while his mechanical arms continued to sign papers. "I owe it to my children," he finally said.

"You have children?"

"I don't know, probably," said Zaph with a metallic shrug. "I feel

that i should give them something that my father never gave me.”

“What’s that?”

“A very large inheritance.”

“No, what’s that sound?” said Trillian. “It sounds like someone knocking.”

Zaph looked over at the side door of his office, which he knew was triple-empregnated with Damp-O-Skin sound shielding. He walked over to it and, sure enough, heard a faint knocking sound, which meant that someone was probably pounding on the door for all he was worth on the other side. He opened the door and Ford Prefect and the head of Marvin the robot tumbled into his office. Four steps behind them in the hallway were two Vogons with laser pistols leveled at where Ford had just been standing.

Zaph looked at the Vogons. “May i help you?” he asked courteously.

“Official business,” said Ergo.

“Ah,” said Zaph. “And what is this official business?”

“We’re here to get Ford Prefect,” said Ergo, pointing his gun at Ford, who was crouched up in a vain attempt to hide behind Zaph’s metal legs. Zaph glanced down at him.

“And what do you plan to do with him, once you get him?” asked Zaph.

There was a long pause. Ergo looked at Nnngk, who looked back at Ergo. Ford peeked out from behind Zaph, who stood, smiling at the two Vogons. Trillian was watching everything from her chair. Marvin looked up at Zaph and said “Oh, there’s my body. I was wondering where that was.”

After a small eternity of uncomfortable silence, Ford hopped up to his feet, strode out of the office to face the two Vogons, and put his hands in the air.

“Well,” he said, “you got me.”

The two Vogons blinked very slowly.

“Yes,” continued Ford, “it was a valiant effort, and you prevailed. You got me. Thanks for your part. A job well done. You can see the receptionist for your parting gifts. I’ve got to run, now, so once again,

excellently played. Ta!”

Ford turned and walked back into the office. Zaph looked at the two Vogons, who stood there trying to think, but not getting very far.

“You may go now,” said Zaph. “And before you leave, i’d like you to clean up all the mess you made.”

He closed the door on the two Vogons, who continued to stand there, trying to work out exactly what had just happened.

Chapter 54

Arthur Dent stood on the observation deck of the massive interstellar cruiser that he and Fonk had apparently just hijacked from the spaceport orbiting the planet Fred. He was trying to work out exactly what had happened, but it had all happened so fast. It seemed to involve a lot of Fonk's eerie-looking arms gesturing and pointing and hurrying Arthur along, and he was fairly sure that both threats and money had flown about liberally, and before Arthur knew it, he was being hustled onto this massive cruiser with Fonk's only explanation being "it's fast."

And fast it was. Arthur felt that he'd hardly had time to contemplate his current situation when there was a soft "bing!" and a soothing voice announced the imminent drop from hyperspace. Arthur sat down, buckled himself in, took a few deep breaths, and closed his eyes.

When his brain had returned to his head after its brief but nauseating voyage aboard his largest toenail in a sea of fur-covered oversized eyeballs, Arthur Dent opened his eyes and gasped. He'd seen the medium-sized blue-green planet that was suspended in space out the window from him countless times, both in pictures and in real life, and in numerous different realities and dimensions, but every time he saw it, there was a small pang in his heart, because no matter what the planet ended up being or not being, it still looked like home.

Arthur stared down at the planet with equal parts hope and fear. Hope that this in fact was the real Earth, and fear that it wasn't. Fonk had said that he knew where Fenchurch was. Could this be it? Would everything suddenly be back to normal and he and Fenchurch could settle back down on Earth?

The giant spaceship that Arthur was on appeared to be parked in orbit above the mid-Atlantic. Arthur could make out the African coastline, which looked much greener than he remembered. He saw the Iberian peninsula and the Mediterranean Sea and noted that it seemed

to be raining in the South of France. Then he picked out the scraggly island of England. It looked to be a gorgeous, sunny day. He wondered what time of year it was. He wondered if his house was still there. He wondered if he still had a job.

Chapter 55

Rob McKenna loved his job. He was the Chief Irrigation and Hydration Officer for the Beeble Brewing Company. He got to work alone, which he liked, he got to see lots of foreign lands, which he also liked, and because he could fly a spaceship at enormous speeds through the atmosphere, he could outrun the rain, which he liked more than anything else.

In his old job, Rob McKenna drove a lorry, and no matter how fast he drove it, he could never outrun the rain. And it always rained. He used to wonder why it was always raining wherever he went, but now he knew. He was a rain god. This information had been given to him by a robot he met on a space station and he wouldn't have believed it except for the fact that he was on a space station talking to a robot when by all rights he should have been on the M4 outside of Swindon. He was, in fact, on the M4 outside of Swindon one morning when it began to rain harder than he'd ever seen it rain in his life. It went past the thudders and the swampers, and on to the holy hells, and then, well, then it got a bit strange. It stopped being rain and looked to Rob McKenna to just be water, completely surrounding his lorry. He felt like he was in a giant fishbowl and he could vaguely make out objects outside of it, but couldn't tell what they were. Then he started to float as if he were weightless and he became aware that there were basically three things outside of his fishbowl: The sun, a large, round, white thing, and a larger, round, blue-and-green thing, which seemed to be surrounded by a lot of little yellow things. Then there was a big flash of light and all that was left was the sun, the round white thing, and the little yellow things, which seemed to be zooming away into the dark. Then the round white thing faded away, as if he was hurtling away from it very fast, and the sun got smaller and smaller until everything was black and he was alone, floating in the cab of his lorry, surrounded by a bubble of water.

He must have fallen asleep, because he was suddenly jolted awake by what felt like the lorry crashing to the ground after having been suspended in the air. There was a great sloshing of water as his bubble lost its cohesion and fell to the ground, or in this case, to the metal floor of a spaceship bay on the great spaceport of Alpha Centauri.

He was welcomed to this strange new place by a talking robot who rather morosely told him where he was and what he was and suggested that he advertise himself as a rain god, which he did. He sold all of the contents of his lorry, as well as the lorry itself, and so was able to live very comfortably on the space station for the months he was there until he got hired by a head in a floating hover-chair who took him and the robot, whom he'd become somewhat fond of, to a planet which was almost exactly like Earth, where he started his new job.

His job was simply to fly around the planet, bringing rain to the continents of crops which were planted there. He would zoom across Europe, push warm, wet air masses around China, and stop for lunch in the tangled jungles of South America, where, even though it was raining, it never quite filtered its way to the jungle floor. He liked this. But his real passion was bringing rain to Australia or Northern Africa. He'd zigzag across an ocean, working up an enormous storm system, then shoot off across the hot, dry plains of wheat and barley, staying in the sunshine as the storm determinedly raged in pursuit of its god.

He lived out of his comfortably furnished spaceship, and parked it wherever he felt like on the planet when it came time to sleep. Every so often he would stop in at corporate headquarters for supplies and to say hello, but mostly he kept to his own schedule.

For the past few days, however, Rob McKenna had had a passenger. She was a pretty young woman who had also been from Earth. He had been asked by Mr. Beeble to give her a tour of the planet and they'd had an enjoyable time discussing holidays they'd taken on the old Earth and visiting places she'd always wanted to see. It made Rob McKenna miss his wife just a bit, but not enough to want to go back to his old life. After all, on old Earth, he was an unappreciated god with a delivery lorry. Here he was a god to be reckoned with—a god with a spaceship.

Chapter 56

Arthur had roamed all through the giant spaceship and had found no one. He accessed the ship's computer and, after a few uncooperative minutes, managed to coax the computer into giving him some information by spouting off some mumbo-jumbo about deactivating its core memory that he remembered from the film *2001 - A Space Odyssey*. The computer seemed suitably threatened and informed him that Fonk had teleported down to the surface, although it wouldn't tell him where.

With no other information to go on, Arthur made the decision to teleport down to England. He could see if his house was still there, then catch a ride into London to see if he could find Fenchurch again. After much explanation and pointing at maps, which were curiously devoid of any cities, towns, or roads, Arthur managed to convey to the computer exactly where he wanted to be teleported to, which he hoped would be right in front of his house. He stepped into the teleport chamber and in the blink of an eye and a total inversion of every bodily organ, he found himself on a familiar low rise in the West Country of England.

Chapter 57

The intercom in Zaph's office booped.

"There's a gentleman and a mouse to see you, sir."

"Good, send them in," said Zaph.

"A mouse?" said Ford, turning to the door with a sudden pang of unease. He glanced at Fenchurch, who had arrived a few minutes before and was telling Trillian about all of the places she'd just visited. Fenchurch stopped and looked up at the door, which slid open.

"Ah! Dr. Fonkenopolous!" said Zaph, extending a hand to the tall, gangly humanoid who'd just walked into the office.

"Doctor?" said Fenchurch.

"Fonkenopolous?" said Ford.

"Hello, Zaph," said Fonk, extending the hand that wasn't holding a mouse to Zaph's outstretched metal arm. "I see that everyone's here. Good."

"Now wait a tick!" said Ford. "Zaph, do you know who this man is?"

"Yeah. He's the guy who switched Trillian's and my brains around."

"Oh. Well, do you know what else he does, when he's known as just Fonk, not Dr. Fonkaplatypus, or whatever?"

"Yeah. He runs the Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy."

"Oh. Well, still, don't you remember what i told you about—oh, wait, that was the other head. Where's Od?"

"Yes, well, the Guide is just to pay the bills," said Fonk. "Brain surgery is more of a hobby." He smiled at them all while Ford unsuccessfully tried to think of something damning to say about him.

"Now then," Fonk continued. "May i introduce those of you who haven't met him yet to Squinkles?" He held up the mouse in his hand, who bowed.

"Have we met before?" asked Zaph.

“Er, no,” said Squinkles, “but you may have met two other mice, who—”

“I have,” interrupted Trillian.

“Ah yes,” said Squinkles, turning to Trillian. “Miss Trillian. I’m sorry that you didn’t take me up on my offer all those years ago, but in a sense, it all worked out better this way.”

“What offer?” asked Ford.

“He wanted me to quit my job,” said Trillian. “Said he could make me fabulously rich.”

“And you didn’t take it?” said Ford and Zaph simultaneously.

Trillian glared at them. “No,” she said. “My work was important.”

“What did you do?” asked Fenchurch.

“I was a reporter,” said Trillian. “I reported on everything, from everywhere, whenever it happened.”

“Yes, and all of your time-travelling reporting was wreaking havoc with the very constants of the universe,” said Squinkles. “Something had to be done.”

There was a silence as everyone stared at Squinkles.

“Fortunately, there was a certain Vogon who wasn’t happy with the fact that people kept escaping the planet he was supposed to have wiped *completely* out, so that set up the opportunity to set things right again.” He paused to look meaningfully at Ford and Trillian.

“That’s where Fonk here comes in,” he continued. “It was his engineering expertise that allowed us to reverse-engineer a stable universe again. Time-travel is, of course, still possible, we’ve just made it very very very expensive to do so.”

“Does that mean that we’re going to have to worry about the Vogons trying to exterminate us again?” asked Ford.

“Oh no,” said Fonk. “I arranged it so that the Vogon in question will have something else to occupy his time. I doubt he’ll ever bother you again.”

“So if that’s done,” said Ford to Squinkles, “why are you here?”

“Oh, i’ve gone into business for myself,” said Squinkles. “I’ve started my own religion, you see, and i plan on giving everyone the answer to life, the universe, and everything.”

“It’s forty-two,” said Trillian.

“Yes, everyone knows that,” said Squinkles, “but thanks to Miss Fenchurch’s brain here, only i will know The Question, and i’ll charge a lot of money to tell people. I’ll make gigazillions!”

“What!” said Fenchurch. “You’re doing this all just for money?”

“Can you think of a better reason?” asked Squinkles.

“Well, what about the enlightenment of humanity?” said Fenchurch.

“Pff!” said Squinkles. “Humanity can barely control where it puts its waste. Why bother enlightening them?”

“Well, i’m not going to help you then,” said Fenchurch, crossing her arms in defiance.

“Oh,” said Squinkles, pulling a tiny box out from under his vest, “i think you will.” He pressed a little button on the box, and everything went black.

Chapter 58

Arthur stood on the low hill in the West Country of England where his house should have been. Judging from the views and general topography, he was fairly certain that he was in exactly the right place. The only problem was that there was no house. Well, that wasn't the only problem. There was also no road, no village, no surrounding farms, no light poles or power lines or anything. Just fields and fields of wheat, as far as the eye could see.

He had been standing there, contemplating this scene for quite a while when a small runabout popped up over the horizon and sped toward him. It circled him once, then settled down on a strip of grass between two cultivated fields. A door swung open and a figure stepped out and waved at Arthur.

Arthur walked over to the runabout, and when he got close enough to see the man standing in its doorway, he knew that this was not Earth at all, but just another planet that looked exactly like it. The man stepped down to the ground.

"Hello!" he said. "Oh, it's you! Hello, Arthur!"

"Hello, Slartibartfast," said Arthur with a sigh.

Chapter 59

Ford woke up without the slightest trace of a headache, which made him realize immediately that something must be wrong. He snapped his eyes open and saw that he was still in Zaph's office, but he was the only one there. He sprang up and dashed for the door, tripping spectacularly over the head of Marvin the robot.

"Ow," said Marvin, in a rather dull monotone.

"Marvin!" said Ford, attempting to make his feet end up closer to the ground than his head. "Where'd they all go?"

"Oh, to the operating room, i suspect," said Marvin.

"Right," said Ford, and he leapt up and dashed out of the office. In a minute or so, he came dashing back in. "Marvin! Where's the operating room?"

Marvin waited until approximately two milliseconds before Ford was about to scream at him again before answering. "I'll show you, but you'll have to carry me."

"Right," said Ford, picking up Marvin's head. He ran back out into the reception area. "Which way?"

Marvin once again waited until the last possible millisecond to answer. "It's that door there that says 'O.R.' on it."

"What? You could have just told me that in the office!"

"Yes, but i didn't want to be left alone in there."

Ford ran across the lobby, cursing, and flung the door open. He found himself in a small observing room with a large window overlooking a clean white room below. In the clean white room were Fenchurch, Zaph, and Trillian, all strapped into metal recliners with wire-infested helmets on their heads. Fonk was pattering around with a large machine at one end of the room that all of the wires from the helmets flowed into. Squinkles was pacing back and forth on a side table.

"Hey!" shouted Ford. Nothing happened. He yelled louder and

started banging on the window. Fonk looked up at Ford, smiled, waved, then went back to fiddling with the machine. Whatever Fonk was planning on doing, Ford was pretty sure that at least one of the participants below wasn't keen on it, and he'd promised Arthur to look after her. He glanced around the room for something to smash the window with before realizing that he had a very handy window-smasher right in his hand.

"Sorry, Marvin," said Ford, as he heaved Marvin's head through the window.

"No, you're not," said Marvin gloomily, as the window shattered around him and he plummeted to the floor of the operating room.

Fonk spun around at the sudden unwelcome crashing noises and dove for his Zapissimo. By the time he reached it, however, Ford had landed, broken his leg, and collapsed into a whimpering heap.

"You mustn't let him interrupt!" Squinkles was shouting. "I need that question!"

Fonk leveled his Zapissimo at Ford.

"Wait!" shouted Ford, while clutching at his broken leg. "You don't have to take her brain!"

"We're not taking it out," said Squinkles. "We're just emptying it. You can fill it back up again when we're done."

"No!" said Ford. "Marvin! Marvin read Arthur's brain! He said it's impossible to know both the question and the answer at the same time."

"Mr. Prefect," said Squinkles, "Arthur Dent's brain was not encoded with the final outcome. This brain is. I suspect that we will get a proper question this time. Now, if you will excuse us, I'd like to get on with it."

"But isn't there some other way?" said Ford, pounding his fist on the ground to try to ignore the pain in his leg."

"What would you have us do, Mr. Prefect?" said Squinkles, putting his arms on what may or may not have been his hips. "Build another computer the size of a planet? Let it run another six billion years? Just hope that it doesn't get destroyed again? No, this is the only way."

“Wait a tick!” said Ford, sitting up and wincing in pain. “How about a computerized *brain* the size of a planet?”

“And where would we find one of those?” said Squinkles, as sarcastically as it was possible for a mouse to sound.

“Marvin?” asked Ford.

There was a pause.

“Yes?” said Marvin.

“How big is your brain?”

There was a longer pause.

“You’re going to make a big deal out of it,” said Marvin despondently.

“No i’m not,” said Ford. “I promise.”

There was an even longer pause.

“It’s the size of a planet,” said Marvin at last.

“See?” said Ford. “See? Just hook Marvin here up to your machine thingy and poof! There’s your answer!”

Squinkles and Fonk looked at each other for a moment. Finally Fonk shrugged. “Worth a try, i suppose. If it doesn’t work, we can go back to plan A.”

“Yes, yes, that sounds logical,” said Squinkles. “Hook him up then.”

Fonk picked up Marvin’s head and placed it on a table. He pried open a panel and plugged a universal access cord from the big machine into Marvin’s head. Then he tapped some buttons on a screen and stood back. There was a slight hum, then nothing happened. Everyone waited for what seemed like an appropriate amount of time and still nothing happened.

“How long do we have to wait?” whispered Squinkles.

“Oh, i’m sorry, were you waiting for me?” asked Marvin.

“Are you done?” asked Squinkles in surprise.

“Ages ago,” said Marvin. “I was just lying here composing a song about not having a body. Would you like to hear it?”

“Er, no, not right now, thanks.”

“No one ever does,” muttered Marvin. The room slipped into silence again except for a very soft tune coming from the vicinity of

Marvin's head.

"Um, Mr. Robot?" said Squinkles.

"I could sing you a different one," said Marvin. "I've written 638,482 of them."

"Nobody cares about your stupid songs!" squeaked Squinkles, stamping his foot. "Now, i've waited a very very long time for the ultimate question and i'd like to know if you have it. Do you?"

"Yes," said Marvin, sullenly.

"Good," said Squinkles. He sat back on his haunches, savoring the moment of anticipation.

"You're not very nice," said Marvin.

"I don't have to be nice!" snapped Squinkles. "I'm about to become extremely rich!" He pulled out his little box with the small button on it. "I'm sorry Fonk, but nobody else can hear this but me."

He pressed the button and everything went black.

Chapter 60

Vogon Jeltz sat in his room. He'd been sitting in this room for quite a while now and wasn't sure if he liked it or not. He wasn't sure about a lot of things.

Vogon Jeltz used to be sure about everything. He used to be Prostetnic Vogon Jeltz, commander of the largest fleet of Vogon Constructor Ships in the galaxy. Despite their name, Vogon Constructor Ships spent nearly all of their time destroying things, not constructing them. Prostetnic Vogon Jeltz didn't really care about this, though. His job was to do the things he was assigned to do, and he did them. And when he was done, he'd put a little checkmark in the box next to the thing he was supposed to do on the list of things that he was supposed to do.

The last list of things that he was supposed to do, when he was still Prostetnic Vogon Jeltz, wasn't a very long list.

- Remove asteroid debris from Jelnik 4.

He'd done that, and checked it off.

- Deliver eviction notices to all inhabitants of the Briny Slumpfish Cluster.

That was taking a long time until he decided that, if there were fewer inhabitants of the Briny Slumpfish Cluster, then the job of delivering eviction notices would be much easier. After blowing up a few worlds, he decided that if there were *no* inhabitants of the Briny Slumpfish Cluster, it would be much easier still, so he blew up all the worlds in the Briny Slumpfish Cluster and put a checkmark in the box next to that task.

- Destroy planet Sol 3 ('Earth'), Sector ZZ9-Plural-Z-Alpha, to make way for construction of J3462 Interstellar Bypass.

That one had taken even longer, due to the fact that the blerky little planet kept popping back into existence, even when his fleet of constructor ships had quite thoroughly destroyed it. Eventually though, through a lot of annoyingly complex manoeuvres, and dealing with many people he did not like, Prostetnic Vogon Jeltz was able to once-and-for-all get rid of that blerky little planet and put a checkmark next to that task on his list.

That brought Prostetnic Vogon Jeltz to the last task on his list.

It wasn't a very complicated task. In fact, it was mindlessly simple, and Vogons generally preferred things that were both mindless and simple. But this mindlessly simple task had caused Vogon Jeltz to lose his appetite, his desire to write poetry, his job, and occasionally his sanity. He wondered if today was going to be one of the days he'd go mad or not.

The list sat in front of him, like it always did. He read the tasks he'd completed, saw the neat checkmarks next to them, and felt good. A small voice in the back of his brain asked "has that last task always been there?" This was a question that he thought about a lot. He seemed to remember a time when the destruction of that blerky planet in Sector ZZ9-Plural-Z-Alpha was the last thing on his list. But at the same time, hadn't the next item also always been there? His brain hurt, as it had for a long time.

Finally, Vogon Jeltz read the last item on his list and then went mad for the rest of the day.

- Do not check this box.

Chapter 61

Arthur was riding along in Slartibartfast's runabout as it zoomed over Southern England. At least, what Arthur remembered as Southern England. Below them stretched wheat fields for as far as the eye could see. No cities, no towns, no power lines, just the occasional maintenance shed or equipment landing pad.

"Chief Operations Officer," Slartibartfast was saying. "It's not as glamorous as building planets, to be sure, but the bottom pretty much fell out of that market."

He guided the craft toward the Southern English coast. Arthur could see the English Channel sparkling in the distance.

"Plus," Slartibartfast went on, "I get to holiday in my beautiful fjords!"

"So this planet is..." said Arthur.

"This is the last planet we built," said Slartibartfast. The company let it go really cheap because they didn't know how valuable it was. I suppose that they didn't really care at that point either, all trying to get away with as little debt as possible... Anyway, it was supposed to be the replacement for *your* planet, Arthur, Earth. But then those mice backed out and went off on that promotional tour with some made-up nonsense. Left us in quite a lurch."

Arthur looked out at the vast fields below them. "Does anyone live here?" he asked.

"Oh yes, many of the employees do," said Slartibartfast. "Although some of them can't stand the fact that the weather changes all the time, so they live in the moon."

"People live in the moon?"

"Well, we had to build a moon in order to get this planet to work the way its supposed to, so it's got shops and flats and entertainment facilities and so on. Mostly we use it for storage, though.

"Storage?"

“For our product. Do you know what we make here, Arthur? Do you know what product was made back on your home planet that no other planet in the entire galaxy seemed to be able to get right?”

Arthur looked below him. “Bread?” he guessed.

“Beer,” said Slartibartfast. “A whole planet, dedicated to making one product. Beer. 281 varieties, to be sure, but still just the one product. It’s amazing how your little planet, with its wobble and spin and moon and specific distance from the sun... All these odd things came together to produce just the right climate to make beer. And no one else in the galaxy can do it as well as us, Arthur. No one.”

Arthur thought about all of the other things that had been made on Earth and realized that, for almost all of them, a cheaper, better, more ergonomically comfortable version could be found somewhere else in the galaxy. But yes, the Horse and Groom did serve up a good pint.

They were flying over the English Channel now, approaching France, or what on Earth would have been called France. Slartibartfast was explaining how all of the continents had been split up into sections, and everything was just a combination of letters and numbers now. Arthur wasn’t really listening. He’d thought of something that his old Earth had produced that couldn’t be made better anywhere else. Fenchurch. He wondered where she was now.

Chapter 62

Fenchurch lay in a lounge chair by a sparkling pool. A pool boy was nearby, handing out oversized towels to other people in lounge chairs. Fenchurch wanted to wave to him, but couldn't seem to lift her arms. A waiter hurried by with a tray full of miniature poodles. There was a splashing noise and Fenchurch saw a dolphin playing in the clear pool. It stuck its head out of the water and began singing a song.

My head, just my head, is alone as can be
It sits all alone by itself, no body
My body's out running around without me
And that's why my head's all alone, you can see

The song faded away, and so did the dolphin, and the pool, and the poolboy with the towels, and the waiter with the poodles. Fenchurch opened her eyes and blinked a few times. She was in a clean white room, strapped to a metal lounge chair. Everyone in the room seemed to be waking up as well; Zaph and Trillian in identical lounge chairs, Ford and Fonk collapsed on the floor.

"What happened?" asked Trillian, looking around.

Fonk stood up and surveyed the scene. He reached over to the table where Squinkles no longer was and picked up a small note. He read it, then smiled.

"Success!" he said. "Ford, consider yourself an employee of the Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy in good standing again. We welcome your further reports."

"Hoopy," mumbled Ford as he rolled around in pain.

"Miss Fenchurch," continued Fonk, "thank you ever so much for your unique services. And my sincere apologies for the inconveniences you suffered. You are free to explore the galaxy."

"Oh," said Fenchurch. "OK."

“Now, as for you two...” said Fonk, looking at Trillian and Zaph. “Um, Marvin?”

“I fixed them,” said Marvin.

“Fixed us?” said Zaph. “Whatdya mean, fixed us?”

Marvin sighed, which is not something that robots generally do, and is not at all a pleasant sound. “Apparently,” he said, rolling his eyes over toward Zaph, “you had a deep neural Impen-O-Cloud placed in your brain which hid some things you weren’t supposed to think about. And you had it transferred over to Trillian here, where it hid some things that she didn’t want to think about.”

“We know all that, metalhead,” said Zaph.

Marvin looked sullenly at Zaph. “If you’re not going to be nice, then i won’t tell you,” he said, then started humming a little tune to himself.

“Marvin,” said Trillian, in her kindest voice, “we’d really like to know what you did. Can you tell us, please?”

Marvin rolled his eyes over to Trillian. “Well, alright.”

“Thank you, Marvin,” said Trillian.

“Well, once a deep neural Impen-O-Cloud is placed, it can’t be removed, so i had to put it somewhere else.

There was a tense silence while Marvin looked at the floor.

“Where did you put it, Marvin?” asked Trillian.

Marvin glanced up at the people in the room, then back down at the floor. The silence continued.

“Well...” said Marvin.

“He put it in me,” said Fenchurch, and all eyes in the room turned suddenly to her. If Marvin could have nodded, he would have, but since he was just a disembodied head sitting on a table, he did nothing.

“Ever since leaving Earth, i’ve had this nagging feeling in the back of my mind,” said Fenchurch. “Something about the great answer, or question, about life, or something. And i could never quite figure out what it was. But now,” she smiled happily, “it’s not there. I feel...” she hunted momentarily for the right words, “at peace.”

Everyone looked at Marvin, who was humming to himself again.

“Thank you, Marvin,” said Fenchurch.

Marvin looked up at her, and if robots could smile, he would have.

“Brilliant speech, Earth-girl,” said Zaph. “Now, can we get out of these chairs already?”

“Oh, right,” said Fonk, and he started unbuckling straps and disconnecting wires on the three people in the chairs. As Trillian was sitting up and massaging her wrists, she had a thought. This was a good thing. She liked having thoughts again.

“Marvin,” she said, “what did you tell Squinkles?”

Everybody stopped what they were doing and looked at Marvin.

“I gave him a question,” said Marvin. “He seemed satisfied.”

There was an awed silence in the room.

“Was it *the* question?” asked Fonk. “*The* question of life, the universe, and everything?”

“Not really,” said Marvin.

“Not really!?” said Fonk with alarm.

“Well, you have to realize that the *answer* to life, the universe, and everything was just an *average* of all possible answers,” said Marvin. “It’s much much harder to find the overall average of all possible questions, so i just made one up.”

“YOU MADE ONE UP!?!?” shouted Fonk.

“Yes,” said Marvin.

“What did you tell him?” shouted Fonk, and if Marvin had had shoulders, Fonk would surely have been gripping them tightly and shaking Marvin in a rage. But since Marvin’s shoulders were currently relaxing in a lounge chair with Zaph’s head just above them, Fonk had to settle for standing and quivering slightly.

“I told him,” said Marvin, ““How many times do i have to tell you to shut up and stop killing people?”“

Fonk stood still. “That’s what you told him?”

“Yes,” said Marvin. “He seemed pleased.”

“How many times do i have to tell you to shut up and stop killing people?” Fonk said quickly, thinking about the words. “Forty-two. Yes, that’s not bad. Seems to add up. Nice and tidy. How many times...

Forty-two. Neat.”

There was a general murmuring that that was a pretty good question.

“So there really isn’t one unifying question or answer?” asked Fenchurch.

“No,” said Marvin. “Everyone has their own question and answer. The only one i know for sure is Arthur Dent’s. His question is ‘How many times must i kill the entity known as Agrajag?’ And his answer is forty-two.”

“Interesting,” said Fonk, stroking the protuberance on his head.

“Why’s that interesting?” asked Ford from the floor. He felt that he had to say something since no one had been paying attention to him for a while.

“Well, it just proves,” said Fonk, “that Arthur Dent is the most average person in the entire universe.”

There was another general murmur of consent.

“Say, where is Arthur, anyway?” asked Trillian.

Chapter 63

Arthur and Slartibartfast were flying across what Arthur would have called France, but what Slartibartfast was referring to as Section E5-N5483. It was populated mostly by fields of hops and barley. Arthur was thinking that this might not be a bad place to live. He was familiar with the geography and climate, there'd be no bothersome neighbors to deal with, and since this planet was orbiting a star that was nowhere near Sector ZZ9-Plural-Z-Alpha, it was highly unlikely that it would simply pop out of existence for no reason. Arthur toyed with this idea as they flew on toward Arthur-didn't-know-where. Wherever it was, he felt that they should be flying faster than they were, but Slartibartfast seemed content to cruise along, checking the fields below as he went.

After a long while, they arrived at wherever it was that they were going, which looked to be a large, nicely designed building overlooking the Mediterranean on the South coast of France, or as it was known locally, overlooking the Bluey Sea on the South coast of Section E4-N1439.

Slartibartfast set the runabout down, and he and Arthur strolled up to the front entrance of the building, where there was a large fountain. The center of the fountain was a large, barely-dressed, voluptuous barmaid with a keg over each shoulder. Streams of water were cascading from the tap on each keg, as well as a third stream which was inexplicably coming out of the ponytail on the back of the barmaid's head. Arthur marveled at the tastelessness of it before entering the building behind Slartibartfast. He glanced at two Vogons who were glumly replacing a shattered window on the front of the building and thought to himself that they looked familiar, but then he realized that he couldn't tell one Vogon from another anyway, so how could these two look familiar? He walked into the lobby.

"Hello, Slartibartfast!" said a large, purple tortoise-like thing

behind a desk in the center of the lobby. "You have a visitor?"

"Yes," said Slartibartfast. "This is Arthur Dent. He is looking for someone and seems to think that they may have ended up here. And by here, i mean, this planet. And if that were true, they most likely would have ended up here. And by here, i mean, this building."

"Name?" said the purple thing behind the desk. An appendage shot out of some area of the thing and accessed a computer. One eye swiveled around to look at the computer screen while the other eye pointed at Slartibartfast.

"Yes, i suppose they'd have one," said Slartibartfast. "Arthur?"

"No Arthur's," said the thing.

"Yes?" said Arthur.

"No," said the thing.

"I'm sorry?" said Arthur.

"You needn't be," said the thing. Arthur noticed that a third eye had appeared on the head of the purple thing and it was looking at him, while the other two eyes continued to look at Slartibartfast and the computer screen.

"Who are you looking for?" said Slartibartfast to Arthur.

"Oh," said Arthur. "Fenchurch. Fenchurch Pan Dowdy."

"Fenchurch Pan Dowdy," repeated the purple thing. "Arrived last week with entity Ford Prefect. Departed twenty minutes ago with entity Trillian."

"What?" said Arthur, in surprise.

"Fenchurch Pan Dowdy," repeated the purple thing again. "Arrived—"

"Trillian?" interrupted Arthur.

"Trillian," said the thing. "Arrived yesterday with entity I'm Not Telling You My Name You Weird Purple Thing. Departed twenty minutes ago with—"

"Where did they go?" asked Arthur.

"Where did who go?" asked the purple thing, politely.

"Trillian and Fenchurch!" yelled Arthur, becoming frustrated.

"I do not have that data," said the thing. All three of its eyes glanced at Arthur, then at Slartibartfast, then split three ways at

Arthur, Slartibartfast, and the computer screen again. Arthur looked at Slartibartfast, who shrugged.

“Out, i suppose,” he said. He shrugged again and walked away, leaving Arthur standing in front of the strange purple thing, one of who’s eyes blinked shut when Slartibartfast walked away, vanishing into its purpleness, leaving just two oddly-placed eyes, one on the computer screen, one on Arthur.

“May i help you with anything else?” said the purple tortoise thing politely. “The tasting rooms are just down the corridor to the left—”

“Ford!” interrupted Arthur, who barely realized that he’d just rudely interrupted the purple tortoise thing, since he wasn’t even listening to what it was saying anyway. “Where’s Ford Prefect?”

“Ford Prefect,” echoed the purple thing. “Arrived last week with entity Fenchurch Pan Dowdy. Departed twenty-five minutes ago with entity I’m Not Telling You My Name You Weird Purple Thing.” The eye that had been looking at the computer screen snapped up so that both eyes were looking at Arthur now. “No, i don’t know where they were going,” it said, before Arthur could ask.

Chapter 64

The Encyclopedia Galactica defines “home” with a dry, antiseptic, catch-all explanation of residential dwellings and various life-forms’ preferences for living in them. It goes on for pages and pages, explaining everything from mollusks to luxury resort planets, and it may very well be fascinating reading, but no one’s ever read it. No one’s ever read it because in all enlightened societies in the galaxy, no one cares. Most people know when they’re home and they don’t need any egghead research scientists and technical writers telling them why they’re there when they’re there.

The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy takes, as usual when comparing these two great works of galactic nonfiction, a much simpler tack. A home, the Guide researchers reasoned, is where people put their possessions, their bed, or their food. This holds true from the most primitive tree-dwellers to giant flippered heads who exist in a semi-aqueous solution and perform all societal interactions by brain-wave alone.

Since possessions are insubstantial and no one really needs a bed, the Guide has adapted the popular saying of the planet Boomseywhoop as its definition of home: “Home is where the refrigerator is.”

Chapter 65

Ford kicked the small refrigerator next to him closed and sat down at the controls of the small, oddly-angled brown spaceship that he'd borrowed from a friend of a friend of a friend. Actually, he wasn't exactly sure who along that line were really friends, but it was easier than saying "an acquaintance of an acquaintance of an acquaintance." But whoever the friend or acquaintance was at the other end of that line from Ford, he or she obviously had horrible taste. Ford had kept opening the refrigerator after every hyperspace jump in the hope that the nine different containers of pureed glob-fish salad would have somehow transformed into something approaching edible, but each time he was faced with the same nine different containers of pureed glob-fish salad. he knew that somewhere in the galaxy, pureed glob-fish salad was considered a delicacy and he made a mental note to find out where that place was and never go there.

Ford snapped out of his momentary reverie, grabbed the controls, and sent the spaceship hurtling down toward a familiar-looking group of islands on the familiar-looking planet below him. When he'd gained entirely too much speed, he slammed on the retro-thrusters and with a number of thunderous bangs, pulled out into a gentle cruise just above the rolling hilltops. He aimed for a low hill just off to his left, quickly spotted what he was looking for, and set the ship down with a heavy thump right next to it.

It, to a casual observer, was a broken-down and abandoned harvesting machine. To an even more casual observer, like Ford, it was a house. Many bits and pieces of many other broken-down machines had been attached to the harvester to form a cozy little living space which looked capable, for the most part, of keeping out the wind and rain.

Ford walked in, found no one home, went straight to the refrigerator, and was not at all pleased to find that it contained a dish of

leftover fish salad. But he was very pleased to find that it contained twenty-seven bottles of beer. He took two, popped them open, and downed the first one on one draw before sitting down to enjoy the second one.

He got about halfway through the second beer (Beeble Brau #12: India Pale Ale) when a familiar voice drifted in through the open window.

“Aaaaugggh!! My tomatoes!” screamed the familiar voice.

Ford glanced out the window and only now noticed that he’d set the oddly-angled brown glob-fish-smelling spaceship down on what appeared to be a vegetable garden.

“Hi Arthur!” said Ford, waving cheerily to the owner of the familiar, if somewhat distressed voice.

Arthur stared, dumbfounded, at Ford, looked back at the spaceship parked solidly where his garden once was, then marched moodily into his house.

“Sorry about that,” said Ford, waving at his parking job. “Forgot to put the landing gear down.”

“How could you forget to put the landing gear down?!” spluttered Arthur.

“I was peckish,” said Ford.

“That doesn’t make any sense!” said Arthur, feeling very annoyed with Ford but at the same time feeling grateful for some company.

“No it doesn’t,” said Ford, “but that’s what makes it fun!”

Arthur stared at him for a moment, wondering if this kind of company was worth it.

“So how’ve you been, Arthur?” asked Ford. “Good life here? I see you’ve placed your house just about where your old one was. Very predictable, but then, you humans like familiarity, don’t you?” he placed his feet on Arthur’s home-made table and took another swig of beer.

“Now look here,” said Arthur. “It’s... It’s good to see you and all Ford, but you needn’t be so rude. I do, in fact, have a very nice life here. It’s peaceful and relaxing and i can tend to my garden... or i could have, anyway, but now that you’ve smashed it..”

“I did say sorry.”

“Oh, it doesn’t matter. I couldn’t get anything to grow anyway. I thought i might get some tomatoes this year, but i won’t know now.” He looked angrily at the brown spaceship, then back at Ford. “But i’m very happy here, Ford,” continued Arthur, looking back at his flattened tomato plants. “I’m happy, and relaxed, and, er...”

“Bored?” suggested Ford.

“Extremely,” sighed Arthur. “I’ve spent the last three days trying to find the most absolutely perfect blackberry from a blackberry patch down the hill, but every time i find a good candidate, i feel compelled to eat it, and then i have to hunt for another one.”

“Blackberries, eh?” said Ford, standing up. “Have you ever had a Gnaxpian flumberry? Big as your hand and sweeter than anything you’ve ever tasted!”

Arthur looked at Ford, then around at the pathetic excuse for a house that they were standing in, then out at the interstellar spaceship parked on his garden. It only took him a few minutes to grab his towel, pack his travel bag, and collect the two or three belongings that he felt he might like to have with him if he was going to visit another planet. he followed Ford out the door.

The ugly oddly-angled brown spaceship lurched up from the soft earth of Arthur’s former garden, did a quick half-spin, then bounced upward into the clear blue sky and the beckoning blackness of space beyond. As it tore away, a sleek, silver spaceship descended gracefully down to Arthur’s harvester house and parked lightly on its spindly legs. A tall grey-green alien stepped out and walked up to the open door.

“Arthur Philip Dent?” it said, looking down at the clipboard in its hands. Then it looked up and around at the harvester’s ramshackle interior.

“Hello?” it said. “Is anybody there?”

