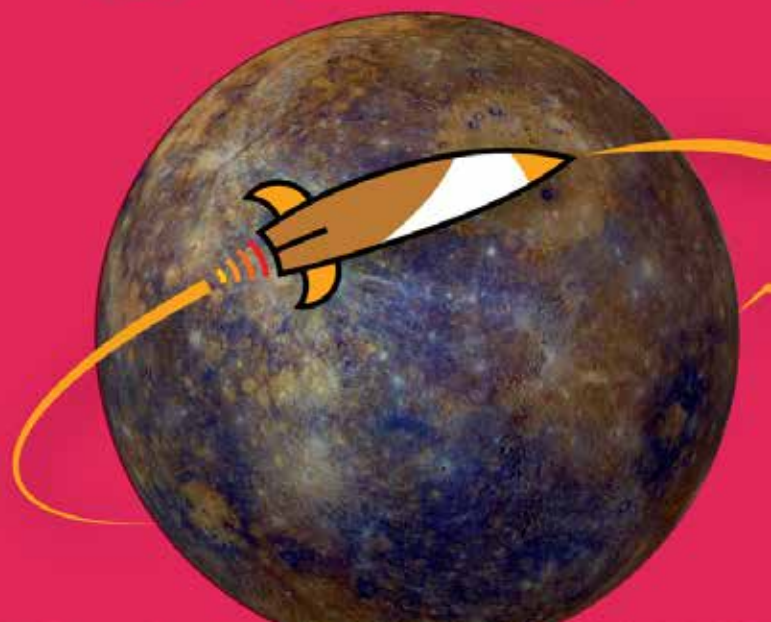


ADAM S.  
**DOUGLAS**  
A VERY BAD ANAGRAM



THE  
**HEART** OF  
**GOLD**



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# THE HEART OF GOLD

BY  
ADAM S. DOUGLAS

This book was written because  
there needed to be a third.



# Chapter 1

The universe is turning. It's a slow, lazy rotation through the infinity of existence, either barely noticeable or not noticeable at all, depending on your frame of reference. A fair number of scholars, academics, thinkers, ponderers, postulators, pundits, and quacks all agree that the universe is turning. After all, they reason, quarks are spinning, electrons spin, atoms, clocks, dials, moons, planets, solar systems, galaxies, clusters, super clusters—everything in the universe is spinning, so the universe itself must be spinning too.

The two main branches of thought on this are that the universe is *spinning*, as some postulators think, and that it is merely *turning*, as other thinkers have postulated. Those on the turning side of the argument argue that the universe hasn't made one complete revolution yet, so it couldn't possibly be described as spinning. Those on the spinning side of the argument think that those on the turning side are self-important nerds who could do with a stiff drink. But semantics aside, the slow rotation of the universe and everything in it brings about a constant waxing and waning of eddies, whirlpools, vortices, spirals, and any other number of Coriolis-effect phenomena, scattered throughout the universe, making the universe a much more entertaining place than if it was just sitting still in its infinite existence.

The consequence of this gentle rotation is that people tend to get caught up in these eddies of existence. When that happens, some people call it fate, or karma, or destiny, or random chance, or just dumb coincidence. A lot of religions have given a name to being swept along in an existential vortex, but few have actually calculated the physics behind it. For some it may determine whether their candy bar gets caught on the mechanical spiral of a vending machine, thereby not falling to where the unfortunate person swept up in this particular undulation of probability can obtain it, thus ruining their morning. For others, it may mean the total destruction of an entire species, along with the planet that they inhabit, as well as a few other planets for good measure. Vortices have a certain unknowable infinite variability to them, which can be unsettling to some scholars, thinkers, ponderers, academics, and sidewalk street magicians.

Some people in this universe are built with the right cosmic electrical polarity to get caught in these swirls of chance. They're the ones that Things Happen To. If a meteor falls in a suburban location, it'll hit their house. If a runaway truck careens into a mall parking lot, it'll smash their car. If a virus has a one-in-ten thousand chance of causing your skin to turn orange, that's what'll happen to the person who Things Happen To. On the other end of the scale are the ones to whom Nothing Ever Happens. They go about their lives, day to day, week to week, year to year, and Nothing Ever Happens to them.

Eatapip Torkskillet was one of those people to whom Nothing Ever Happened. She grew up, went to school, got some degrees, found a job, became very successful in her job, and her life was looking to play out in a very normal and uninteresting way. She was an engineer, and a very good one too. Her current job was not just designing things, but building them as well. She lived on the planet Cloweze, which had insanely good social services and a tradition of children not leaving home until they were well into their thirties, so she didn't *have* to work, she just wanted to. And having multiple advanced degrees in mechanical engineering, structural engineering, electrical engineering, temporal engineering, and philosophical engineering gave her a slight edge over her dim-witted coworkers.

Eata's mother had advised her to go into engineering because, as she said, "they never fire the engineers," which Eata had found to be true. On numerous occasions, whatever company she happened to be working for at the time would go through a massive purge of employees—all of the "non-essential" positions—but regardless of the scale of the cuts, she always came out of it with a job. Middle management was always the first to go, then marketing, then custodial staff. If things were really dire, upper management would freeze their pay and eliminate the coffee machines, but no one wanted to fire the engineers because they were the only ones who knew how everything worked.

It was a bit of a surprise then, on that Bloosday in the city of Tadumbadum on the planet Cloweze that Eatapip Torkskillet was fired. The universe had blooted along in its steady turning and one of those little ripples of wisping existence swirled over Cloweze, causing somebody in middle management to realize that they could outsource all of their engineer's jobs to robots, which he proceeded to initiate. This decision allowed this particular middle manager to move to the ranks of upper management and he was able to leave the company with a gargantuan retirement package well before all of the lawsuits for faulty design sent the company solidly into bankruptcy. Apparently robots were very good at designing and building things for other robots but didn't factor in the fact that most users aren't made of metal and products with whirling knives might damage a cellular organism who might be trying to use it.

Being one of those people to whom Nothing Ever Happens, Eata was caught off guard by the sudden lack of employment, but resolved to use her newly-found free time to do some travelling and maybe take up a hobby. "This will be good," she thought to herself.

The next day, she was offered a new job by someone who was much smarter than the middle manager who had fired her. The spin of the universe can be an interesting thing.



# Chapter 2

Arthur Dent's head was spinning. He was looking around and around and making odd motions while trying to act as though he wasn't looking where he was trying to look.

"It's all about casual deception," he said to Fenchurch, who was sitting on the base of a crumbling statue in a crumbling courtyard in the crumbling town where they both had been living. "You have to decidedly not look at what you're most assuredly trying to look at. Peripheral vision, you know." he ducked and weaved around the courtyard, tipping his head this way and that, hopping at odd angles, and generally looking absurd.

Fenchurch laughed. "Any luck?"

Arthur stopped and glanced around. "No. Random assures me that they're there, but i can't see anything." He went over and sat down next to Fenchurch. "Perhaps i'll see if she can locate one and pull it down the next time she's around."

"When do you suppose she'll be back?"

"Who knows? She can't have gone far though. And she'll need food at some point."

Arthur put his arm around Fenchurch and they sat in the silent courtyard. He was quite happy. He could understand why his daughter Random was not at all

happy, but there wasn't much he could do about that other than provide her with meals when she was around. And she would be around soon. The only source of food on this planet was the obelisk near their house, underneath which items of usually-edible foods appeared daily. Fenchurch called it "manna from nowhere."

Random had become bored and restless with the planet Golgafrincham almost as soon as she was stranded here, along with Arthur, Fenchurch, and two Australians, Libby and Sputty. Within a week, she said that she was going off to find a spaceship and walked away from the little town, only to arrive back at it a couple days later. In subsequent journeys, she discovered that no matter which direction she went, if she travelled in a straight line away from the town and didn't vary her direction, she eventually came back to the same town that she'd left, except from the opposite direction. Apparently, the five Earthlings trapped here were contained in a very small part of the entire planet. That's when she started finding the surveillance cameras. She announced to the rest of the captives that they were living in a zoo, which was met with disbelief from the others except for Fenchurch, who found it plausible.

After a while, Libby and Sputty agreed as well, leaving only Arthur to stubbornly dismiss the notion.

"It's a zoo, dad! There's cameras everywhere! We're in a cage, we're fed daily, we can't leave... what else would you call it?"

“A nice place to retire?” suggested Arthur. Random threw up her hands and stormed off. Fenchurch patted Arthur on the back and advised him to be more empathetic to his daughter.

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The Keepers of the galaxy, like Arthur, wouldn't call it a zoo either. They thought of it as more of a preserve, where the rare Earthlings could live in their natural habitat. And the Earth habitat wasn't the only preserve maintained by the Keepers—it wasn't even the only preserve on Golgafrincham. They had set up a few areas of this planet for their use in saving various species. It was, after all, a very nice life-sustaining planet with a pleasant climate that happened to be completely empty. And as interplanetary law regarding formerly-inhabited but abandoned planets is rather murky at best, the Keepers claimed it and set about building their preserves and locating the vanishing species that they wished to keep.

Of course there were plenty of anthropologists and sociologists who were planning on making their careers out of being experts in Earthlings, so having a few to study was certainly a boon. And although they worked in the shadows most of the time, the Keepers weren't dumb. They were perfectly happy to fund their activities by charging a small fee for people to watch the live-streams of the strange animals from Sector ZZ9-Plural-Z-Alpha. And since the galaxy is very large and there

are untold trillions of people in it, even getting a small percentage of them to cough up a bit of their income to watch a lower life form in its daily activities generated quite a large sum of money for the Keepers.

The Earthlings in their habitat didn't know this of course, but the Keepers didn't feel that they ought to trouble them with the finances.

# Chapter 3

Eata sat at home on her first (and, as she would soon find out, last) day of unemployment. She flicked through the channels on the huge screen in front of her, pausing briefly on a wild nature feed of some strange feathered quadrupeds climbing trees and arguing about sub-prime mortgages. If she'd been living in the future, that same channel might have carried highlights from the newly-installed Earth habitat, but Eata had lost her job on a Bloosday far, far in the past from that event. Right now, the now for Eata, an Earthling named Arthur Dent was living a quiet life in the country west of London, not at all aware that one of his friends was an alien from somewhere near Betelgeuse.

There was a “boop!” Eata answered the phone. The person on the other end greeted her kindly, said that he had been following her career closely and felt that she was just the right person to design and build a grand project for his company. Could she catch a flight to Sirius Alpha immediately? She asked about the job and was told that it was highly complex, very classified, and paid extremely well. She caught the next flight.

The first thing Eata learned about her new job was that she would essentially be building an execution chamber. The morality of this was giving her some doubts as to doing the job, but as she'd already spent an

entire day signing papers and getting an ID tag, she thought that perhaps she could find a way to rationalize it. Earning in one day what she previously earned in half a year was a handy way to do that.

“You just have to have a heart of gold,” explained her supervisor. “Then it won’t bother you so much.”

“Gold?”

“Yes. Glowing, shiny, malleable *and* ductile, able to survive in harsh environments without corroding, and also tough, ’cause it’s made of gold—y’know, metal.”

“Ah,” said Eata. “I see.” She didn’t, really, but the idea stuck with her as she designed the chamber and she let the bad parts of the project reflect off of her heart of gold while letting the good parts melt into its glowing core.

The bad part of the project was death. Like any execution chamber, death usually played a big part in its design, and this one was no different. The good part was that this was a challenge—a bigger challenge than she’d ever faced, and she relished the work. Perhaps the idea of gold impacted her ideas, but as she worked on the nuts and bolts of how to make the thing work, she also designed great swoopy buildings to house the thing. Some of her drawings were cold and sterile, but many were drawn with great curving lines and sleek shapes—much like spaceships or very stylish weapons. One in particular she liked quite a lot and kept coming back to and refining. It looked like some great futuristic running shoe—efficient and functional, but stylish and trendsetting as well.

In the end, the budget was suddenly slashed for the actual construction of the thing, so it ended up being a dull half-dome plunked down on the rocky surface of a dead planet. Eata was disappointed, but proud of her work on the functional aspect of it. She had urged the project managers to call it “The See of Eternity,” but in the end, the marketing department named it “The Total-Perspective Vortex.”

Once the project was done, Eata was given a gigantic severance package and sent on her way, but something about the Total Perspective Vortex nagged at her. She had spent countless hours immersed in probabilistic astrophysics and had solved the equations necessary to make the Total Perspective Vortex work—to show a snapshot of the universe in its totality for a frozen fraction of time, where everything was where it was with a certainty of 100%. But what about the other end? What were the formulas for determining a certainty of zero? Or, put another way, was it possible to calculate infinite improbability?

As it turns out, it was, and as soon as Eata did it, the vessel for the functionality of such a concept simply appeared in her back yard. It was sleek, it was smooth, it was created from the remnants of the designs in her head, and it looked a little bit like an ultra-modern running shoe. Eata realized that the Total Perspective Vortex couldn’t exist without its extreme opposite—sometimes the universe needs to be kept in balance (some claim that it must be so to preserve existence, others claim it’s simply for tax reasons)—and in the

case of a machine where there was no improbability whatsoever, its opposite was a machine that had all of the improbability that there ever would be. She named it The Heart of Gold.



# Chapter 4

“What’s the probability that we’ll have apple pie tomorrow?” said Arthur as the group of Earthlings sat around the dinner table.

“Uh, one hundred percent, duh,” said Random. “We’re in a zoo. They’re listening to us. Whenever you get one of your little cravings, whatever you wish for shows up in the pile of food the next day.”

“Does it?” said Arthur. He knew this of course. Random had been particularly grouchy that evening and Arthur felt compelled to needle her a little bit. But yes, whoever was keeping them there were certainly diligent in providing for their needs. Arthur had taken to spouting out lines like “boy, a nice club sandwich would be great right about now,” or “i’ve always had a fondness for honey-Dijon potato chips.” Lately he’d been trying out other things, just to see what the limits of the providers were. Earlier that day he’d remarked out loud to no one in particular “i’m fancying something that tastes like chocomato” to see if they might send him chocolate-covered cherry tomatoes or some such thing. After all, if he had to be trapped on a planet, he might as well have some fun with it. And of all the planets that he’d been trapped on, this one was by far the most comfortable and convenient. Plus, Fenchurch was there, and he’d like to be anywhere that she was.

Random let out an inventive string of curse words for the viewing audience and stormed out of the house.

“You should probably talk to her, Arthur,” suggested Fenchurch.

Arthur felt a little sour about that. “She’s all grown up. She can figure herself out.”

“No matter how grown up she is, she’s still your daughter.”

Arthur sighed and wished that Trillian was there. But then he thought about how good of a parent Trillian was likely to be, given what Arthur knew about her, and decided that he’d have to be the responsible one. He got up and walked outside.

Random was standing with her arms crossed, glaring at the black obelisk across the square from the house where they were all living. Arthur walked up and stood with her for a moment. “I’ve been trapped on planets before,” he said. Random said nothing. “I was stranded on prehistoric Earth for quite some time, actually. I met the people from this planet—the people who became our long distant ancestors.” Random remained stonily silent. “They weren’t too bright, as I remember.”

“But they left *this* planet, which is more than we’ve been able to do.”

“Er, yes. Well, I wouldn’t say that they left so much as they were sent away.”

Random turned to him. “Do you have a point?”

“Well, I guess you have to learn to accept it.”

“That our ancestors were idiots?”

“No! Well, yes, but i meant that you should accept that we’re stuck on this planet.”

“Why should i?”

“I don’t know, why not? Give me one reason why this isn’t a delightful place to live!”

“One? I’ll give you *seventeen* reasons why! One, we’re in a zoo. Two, it’s a zoo. Three, we’re living in a zarking zoo!”

“Okay, granted, there are some privacy issues, but you have to admit that it’s quite a nice village, right?” Random glared at him. “I mean, it’s charming, the weather’s nice, we have delicious food, it’s... it’s...”

“Boring!” said Sputty from behind them.

Arthur turned around to see that Sputty, Libby, and Fenchurch had come outside. “Boring?” he echoed.

Fenchurch gave him a smile—the kind of smile that you use when you’re about to tell someone something that they obviously don’t get. “It is, Arthur. We have nothing to do.”

“But, but, you’re enjoying our walks... and cooking.... And Libby, you said you loved gardening.... Sputty, aren’t you having fun tearing down buildings?”

“I was,” answered Sputty. “It’s right fun for a bit, but crikey, can’t be bashing things down forevah, eh?”

“And i do love gardening,” said Libby, “but not all day every day. Gets tedious.”

Arthur looked around at the others. “So you all... hate it here?”

“Yes,” said Random

“No!” said Fenchurch at nearly the same time.

Random rolled her eyes and Fenchurch continued. “It’s quite charming here Arthur, and our life is simple and easy. But humans, i think, need a challenge. We need our lives to have some meaning.”

Arthur pointed to the number outside their house. “Forty-two,” he said.

Fenchurch gave him another one of those smiles. “That’s not what i meant.”

“I have a challenge,” said Random. She nodded at the black obelisk in front of her. “Let’s break through that thing and get out of here.”

“How?” asked Libby.

Random picked up a rock and threw it at the obelisk. It clacked against the side and bounced away, tumbling to a stop in front of her again. She picked up a handful of rocks and started flinging them, one by one, at the obelisk. The obelisk, as obelisks are wont to do, did nothing.

“Whatdya think, one o’ them’s gonna go through all of a sudden?” asked Sputty.

“Maybe.”

“Pretty improbable.”

“Yes,” said Random, throwing another rock. “It’s very,” (she threw another) “very,” (and another) “im—” (one more) “probable.” She flung the remaining small stones in her hand at the obelisk, which remained stubbornly unresponsive.

“Perhaps they’ll let us take a vacation!” suggested Arthur after a momentary silence when the rocks had settled themselves and the obelisk had continued to do

what obelisks generally tend to do, which is nothing.

Random spun around. “What? Who?”

“Er, the Keepers. The ones who put us here. I met them, you know, on that beach. Didn’t i tell you that? Well, perhaps they’ll let us take some time off—a sabbatical of sorts. Y’know... for... good behavior?”

Random stared at him for a few seconds. “That’s idiotic.”

“Well, it’s possible.”

“Yeah, sure, it’s *possible*, but climbing out of here through that obelisk is *possible* too! How did you not end up stuck forever on prehistoric Earth?”

“Oh, it was Eddie, i think. Ford said something about Eddie being in the time-space something-or-other.” Random looked at him blankly. “There was a couch...” he continued, but Random stopped listening and stalked away.

# Chapter 5

Eata sat on the red and tan floral-print couch on the bridge of The Heart of Gold. She wasn't sure why there was a couch in there, but it was a nice place to sit and think, so she sat and think. This vessel that she had, it needed controls. It required a way to somehow manage the infinite improbability of itself and use that as a drive of some sort—as a means to move about in space. This was quite a puzzler and she was keen to solve it. What she'd need was a computer brain that was so complex, so infinitely clever, that it could pilot the ship and get it from one place to another while at the same time keeping it all in one piece. It would have to be an immensely large brain—size of a planet, maybe, but crammed into some sort of utilitarian box. As she contemplated the problem, she realized that the ultra-large controller brain for The Heart of Gold would need to be split into two parts—one built into the ship itself, the second as a fully-autonomous entity apart from the ship, but existing inside it. Once she figured out the recursive nature of the brain inside a brain, she extrapolated it out to infinity, thus laying the groundwork for a planet-sized computer inside a head-sized container.

The design of this brain took a while, but once all of the calculations were calculated and the drawings drawn, Eata brought everything into The Heart of Gold,

flipped on the infinite improbability drive for a fraction of a second, and flipped it off.

“Greetings,” came a calm, soothing voice from the entire ship. “I am the onboard computer. Where would you like to go today?”

“Hmmm,” thought Eata. Where *should* she take this revolutionary craft on its first flight? Droombor Theta? Randagulus 7? Down to the pub on the corner?

“We are there,” announced the computer. Eata looked out the window and saw that she was now somehow parked in front of the pub in a street that was far too small to fit a galactic spaceship but accommodated it nonetheless. She left the spaceship and had a pint, chatting with the regulars who seemed to have no concerns whatsoever that there was an enormous spaceship parked out front. When she’d had enough of the conviviality, she went back aboard the spaceship and furrowed her brow in thought. She opened her mouth to ask how the computer had known to take her to the pub but before she could utter a sound, it spoke.

“The pub was the logical choice for your first destination, so I took the liberty of bringing you here.”

“Great. I guess we should—”

“We have arrived home.”

“Okay. Well, this is—”

“The sensation that you are feeling of eeriness is completely normal when placed in a situation where your desires are met before you can vocalize them.”

“I see,” said Eata, waiting a second to see if the computer was going to tell her what she was thinking.

“I’m not,” it said. “And for a more robust test of the capabilities of this craft, perhaps a short jump to the outer satellites and back?”

Eata sat back on the couch and thought about it for a moment. “Okay, let’s do iiiiiittttttffffffffffbbbbbbbbbbit,” That last word, “it,” seemed to come out a lot longer than she expected, but while she was saying it, she did notice that The Heart of Gold was momentarily parked in high orbit among some pointy satellites, then in what seemed like no time at all, once again parked in her backyard.

“Everything is fine!” said the computer, in a slightly less smooth-baritone voice. Eata looked around the cabin. All looked normal—the control panels blinked calmly, the readouts read normal, the lighting was bright but not glaring, the couch was, well, a couch, but had it always been teal and cream-colored? She furrowed her brow again.

“I am running self-diagnostics,” said the computer. “Check back soon.”

Eata shrugged and left The Heart of Gold to figure itself out. The brain that she built for it was vastly superior to any common super-genius so she had no doubt that it would make any necessary adjustments to the ship and she could go for a longer test later. She went inside her modest house to watch some modest TV.

In the middle of season three, episode nine of the Spacecapades reboot Spacecapades: The Faraway Years (starring Lance Crouchy as Captain Whazzat, the grand-nephew of the original Captain T (played in flashback



by Adad Zupple (who famously originated the role of Pi-hat, the sentient water-bear from the original series (episodes four and five, which were never aired due to the cancellation of the original Spacecapades during episode three))), Eata's phone buzzed.

"Huzzoo?" she said into the receiver.

"Miss Torkskillet? This is Zeta-one Reclamation Service. Are you aware that your TR4 is sitting in our lot?"

"My what is where?"

"Your TerraLuxe TR4 runabout." There was a momentary silence. "It's a spaceship." More silence. "It's been impounded, it's sitting in our lot, and we'd like you to remove it."

"I don't own a spaceship! Oh, wait, i don't own *another* spaceship. I have one, but it's parked in my backyard at the moment."

"You are Eatapip Coratta Torkskillet of Cloweeze in the Pblblblup system?"

"Yes," said Eata, marvelling at the flawless pronunciation of "Pblblblup."

"Well, this TR4 is registered to you and if you don't come and pick it up, you'll be charged towing fees, impound fees, storage fees, cleaning fees, parking fees, and eventually disposal fees, which include stripping fees and crushing fees. Can you come by tomorrow and get it?"

"Where are you located?"

"Just outside Betelgeuse."

"Betelgeuse?! That's halfway across the galaxy! I can't get there by tomorrow!"

“Did i mention transport fees and fumigating fees?”

“But i—hang on....” She looked outside to the gleaming Heart of Gold parked primly on her lawn. *Well*, she thought to herself, *i guess this would be a good test of the infinite improbability drive*. “I’ll be there in a tock.”

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The Monoluxe Space Vehicle Company, when it first started building spaceships, was not known for its design aesthetics. In fact, one reviewer called their product line “ugly from top to bottom. Ugly in such a way that, compared to common things that are intrinsically ugly, these ships are uglier. Not just uglier—ugliest. The utmost superlative of the worst of everything. Gad, they’re ugly.”

Feeling that this kind of reputation was impacting their sales in a negative way, they sought to improve their product line, but after a few disastrous rollouts from a series of incompetent designers, they finally gave in to corporate pressure and decided to steal some designs. The spark of genius that saved the company came from a lowly filing clerk in the front office who suggested that, rather than stealing a popular design and modifying it just enough so as not to get sued, they should find a planet that no one would ever travel to and lift whatever vehicle designs they had, down to the smallest detail. The trick was to find the right planet. It couldn’t be so poorly reviewed as to attract galactic hip-

sters. It had to be so banal and uninteresting that no one, not even on a bet, would ever go there. They eventually found their holy grail of a planet, far out on the unfashionable Western Spiral Arm of the galaxy in Sector ZZ9-Plural-Z-Alpha, with this uninviting entry in the *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*: "Mostly harmless."

Monoluxe was rebranded as TerraLuxe and the company put out its first line of retro-chic luxo-affordable cruisers with exact copies of Ferraris, Aston-Martins, Lamborghinis, and Lotuses. The designs from the big peninsula country did fairly well, but the denizens of the sector of the galaxy where the TerraLuxe company was based really took to the charming designs from the little island nation farther north, so TerraLuxe concentrated their pilfering there, resulting in the well-received launching of the E-type, the TR4, the TR7, the Esprit, and the DB5. Success was had. Awards were won, money was earned, and the only thing that worried the executives at TerraLuxe was the infinitesimally small chance that a being from Earth might ever discover that all of their designs were stolen. But they didn't worry that much about it. After all, the chances of that happening were almost one-hundred percent against. Almost.

# Chapter 6

“Are we there yet?” asked one of the heads of Zaphod Beeblebrox, the one that was firmly attached to his body. The other head, which was less firmly attached to his body, was sound asleep and drooling.

“I told you,” said Trillian, slightly annoyed, “i can’t tell you if we’re there yet if i don’t know where *there* is!”

“You’ll know it when you see it. Or, actually, probably not, since you’ve never been there, have you?”

“How would i know?”

“Oh, you’d know if you’d been there! Man, would you know! Whoo! I mean...” he trailed off, staring out at the stars.

“You mean?”

“I am?”

“What?”

“Mean.”

“What?!”

“You said i was mean. I don’t think i’m mean. I think i’m quite hoopy. Wake up!” Zaphod yanked his shoulder forward, causing his other head to bobble out of unconsciousness.

“Are we there yet?” asked the bobbing, just-waking-up head.”

Trillian, in a move that would have made her daughter proud, rolled her eyes and stalked out of the

room. She plunked herself down on the comfy couch in the common room of this sleek ship and looked around. She liked this spaceship—clean, functional, no-nonsense. And the exterior aesthetics of it—low and sleek and entirely black with not even a hint of chrome accenting—brought it all together in a very cool package. The individual sleeping cabins were spare, but spacious, and the onboard computer seemed to have been built with absolutely no personality-plus programming. It answered questions, piloted the spaceship, and generally kept things humming with no idle chit-chat. Trillian liked that. She got enough idle chatter out of Zaphod.

The only odd thing about this cool ship was that there was one door just off from the common area that would not open. No matter what tricks Zaphod and Trillian tried, the door remained obstinately closed. Trillian surmised that it was keyed to the ship's owner and would only open for whoever that was. A small part of her worried that whoever the owner was might decide to come and claim their ship back, but that was only a small worry. When she was travelling with Zaphod, there were usually many more and far more serious things to worry about.

There was a “bing!” from the front of the ship and both of Zaphod's heads called out “we're there!”

Trillian entered the helm to find herself looking out at a mass of color and light. The dust of a million exploded stars swirled in a huge nebula around them. Trillian could hear the ship's defense systems working

at maximum capacity disintegrating any larger chunk of stellar dust that had a mind to sail straight into the side of the ship. Ahead of them were a dozen or so small planetoids, flowing along in the cosmic eddies, each one its own beacon of color and light. It was terrifying and stunningly beautiful all at once.

“Where are we?” asked Trillian, in awe.

“StellarFest!”

“*The* StellarFest? How’d you get in?”

“What’dya mean, how’d i get in? I’m Zaphod zarking Beeblebrox! Former and future President of the Galaxy! I know people!”

The sleek black spaceship eased itself toward one of the planetoids, space debris popping out of existence all around it. As they neared it, Trillian noticed that it was actually a huge crazily-decorated space station which turned out to be the parking garage. They glided into a large port behind a couple other cruisers and were directed through the massive hollow sphere to a docking bay, where the ship automatically parked itself. Zaphod popped up out of the captain’s chair and eagerly bounded out of the spaceship, Trillian at his heels.

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StellarFest is listed in the *Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy* as one of the top-10 festivals to visit before you die. In fact, many people go to StellarFest *to* die, as there are a staggering amount of things there that

could, and would be very happy to, kill you. StellarFest is the greatest music and arts festival in the galaxy, happens infrequently and completely unannounced, lasts for months, and generally wrecks the economy of whatever planet it happens to be on. Tickets to StellarFest can only be acquired from a friend of a friend and there is a vast and highly complex network of people whom you only know as “that guy that came to Globax’s party” or “that woman who my friend Mooflo knows.” They’ll sell you a ticket or two, but they don’t want to see you after that.

Of course, there’s another equally complex and even vaster network of “friends of friends of friends” who are in the business of claiming that they know someone that you know just to sell you a ticket to StellarFest. These tickets are nearly always counterfeit, but zark, you’ll be happy to get one, even at triple the price and you won’t ask questions because it’s zarking StellarFest, man! When you get to the festival (if you even do—no one really knows where or when it’s taking place until after it starts) you’ll find that no one collects the tickets, there’s no entrance gate, and the organizers couldn’t care less if you have a ticket or not—that’s not what they’re in business for. You won’t even notice, though, because there’s so much going on all at once that the mundanity of handing someone a ticket to get in gets lost in the overwhelming spectacle of the thing.

The organizers of StellarFest had high ideals of a great gathering of peace and love and a lot of people

with disposable income all converging to listen to endless jam bands and spend money like it was going out of style. Money, of course, was *never* going out of style, but the genius of the StellarFest organizers was to convince everyone attending that it was, and soon, and by glork you wouldn't want to be caught with something as passé as *cash* on you, would you? Not a chance! The first few StellarFests were run as any normal festival might be run, with lines, and tickets, and special areas for each venue and a horde of unwashed college kids lazily attending to whatever station they were posted at with not much of any answers to whatever questions came up. Then the organizers realized that they'd make more money if they just didn't hire anyone and promoted the whole event as an exercise in "living in peace and looking out for your fellow traveller."

Having successfully farmed off all of the running of the event to the people attending the event, the organizers retired and watched their bank accounts grow as tickets were sold, bands were booked, and celebrities endorsed and attended a festival which just happened on its own. This is why the event was so deadly, as the legality of anything at StellarFest was determined by whoever happened to be standing next to you and by and large, most of them were either pretty laid back and tolerant of anything, or simply on so many drugs that the meaning of good, bad, or existence in general was a debatable concept.

As StellarFest grew in popularity, it became harder and harder to find suitable venues which could accom-



modate so many wandering souls without the local authorities getting fed up and catapulting them into the nearest star, so increasingly larger and weirder places to hold the event started appearing. People made money selling every attendee a self-sustaining clear bubble so that the entire festival could be held in the wispy atmosphere of a gas giant planet. People made some more money by selling people virtual surround interactive spheres so that the whole thing could be held out past the edge of the galaxy in empty space. People made even more money by staging the event in a black hole so that the entire thing could be compressed down to fit inside of a nice silver thimble. Basically, StellarFest happened whenever enough people were duped into believing that it would happen and they all ended up at the same place at the same time to hear some bands who'd never turn down a gig of that size.

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The particular StellarFest that Zaphod and Trillian were now wandering around in was set on a series of rocks in a nebula. Light came from all directions, atmosphere was pumped in and held in place with thousands of Grav-O-Mats scavenged from the thousands of spacecraft which the organizers inherited after every StellarFest due to their owners never coming back to claim them, and every little planetoid had an array of TelePortals where you could pop from one venue to the

next, all spinning in a cosmic dance to the rhythm of a thousand jam bands all noodling at once.

It was, in every sense of the word, stellar.

# Chapter 7

Arthur and Fenchurch were sitting on a large flat rock at the edge of a field looking up at a canopy of stars. A sprinkling of rain had passed through earlier, but the clouds were slowly clearing and the couple could see the pinpoints of light above them, intermittently obscured but still visible.

“Do you think the Golgafrinchams had constellations?” asked Fenchurch.

“Oh, i would imagine,” answered Arthur. He scanned the specks above them for a moment. “Look there, you could reasonably make the shape of a teapot with those brighter ones.”

“And that would be the ancient god of tea?” Fenchurch giggled and Arthur gave her a squeeze.

“I suppose it could have been a soup kettle, or a kettle for milk, or some such—” He stopped and sat up straighter. Fenchurch had heard it too—a floopy sound, like someone shaking out a bedsheet. “Random?” called out Arthur.

“I think it came from up there,” said Fenchurch, looking skyward.

“Up there? How could—” he stopped again, then pointed. Drifting down below the clouds was a man in a parachute. Fenchurch and Arthur watched as the man descended then tumbled to the ground in the next

field over. They both got up and made their way quickly through the semi-darkness. Two of Golgafrincham's three moons were up that night, but as they were fairly small moons, they didn't provide much light. Arthur stumbled as they crossed the rock wall between the fields and swore, causing the man, who was untangling himself from his parachute, to crouch and look about suspiciously.

"Hello!" called out Fenchurch as they approached. "Do you need some help?"

The man stood up. "I'm fine," he said. "Just got a little off course." He finished unclipping himself from the parachute, then looked searchingly around the landing area.

"Did you lose something?" asked Arthur, also peering around the parachute to see if there was anything else besides parachute there.

"No! No, just, uh... say, is there a house nearby with a telephone?"

"We've got a house," said Fenchurch, "but i'm afraid no telephone. It's this way." She started off toward the village and the man took a step after her then collapsed onto the ground.

"It's okay!" he said, in obvious pain. "Just twisted my ankle a bit."

"I'd say that's a bit past twisted," said Arthur as he looked down at the foot that was turned sideways away from the lower leg of the man. "And where's your shoe?"

After a bit, Fenchurch and Arthur were able to half

carry, half support the man back to #42. They set him down on the couch and Fenchurch started brewing some tea while Sputty and Libby examined the broken foot.

“Yeah, Mate, definitely broke,” said Sputty. “Might hafta just whack it back in ta place.”

“Oh shut it, Sputty!” said Libby. “Now don’t listen to him. I’ll put a splint on it, then we’ll leave a note for the Keepers. Maybe they can send a doctor in.”

“In?” said the man. “Am i on a reservation?”

“I’d call it more of a preserve. Nice place, but, well, we can talk about it in the morning.”

“Have some tea,” said Fenchurch, handing the man a cup. “it’ll warm you up. We probably should get you out of those wet clothes, too. How’d you get so soaked? Seems like it hardly rained at all, and that was a while ago.”

“I, uh... it was raining harder up high, i guess. And i’m not much of a tea fan. Got any coffee?”

“Ooh, no, sorry. We’re all tea drinkers here,” said Fenchurch, apologetically.

“We’ll get some in tomorrow, i reckon,” said Sputty. He turned his head up toward the corner of the room. “Oi! How ’bout some coffee for me mate here, uh...” He turned back. “What’s your name?”

“Dan. Dan Cooper.”

Sputty turned back to the ceiling. “For me mate Dan here! Cheers!”

Dan peered past him to the ceiling. “Who are you talking to?”

“Oh, just the Keepers. Ya need something, ya just yell it out. They’ll bring it ’round right quick.”

“Ohhhh... kay...”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Dan. I’m Fenchurch” said Fenchurch. “This is Arthur, Libby, and Spotty. Why don’t you rest now, and we can talk in the morning, okay?”

Arthur and Fenchurch retired to their room upstairs, quietly discussing the new arrival. They decided that he was definitely from Earth, but sounded more American than English and were curious about how he escaped Earth’s total destruction.

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Early in the morning, Arthur stirred from sleep. He thought he’d heard a noise so he put on his robe and slippers and went downstairs. It was just getting light in the house and the first thing he noticed was that Dan was no longer on the couch. The answer to where he was came quickly, though as Arthur heard a clang coming from the kitchen. He walked in to find Dan fussing with an automatic coffee maker.

“Good morning!” said Arthur, cheerily. Dan flinched and sent coffee grounds flying across the counter. “Did you sleep well?”

“Yeah. Fine. Say, what’s the big idea telling me you didn’t have coffee when you got a fancy coffee maker right here?”

“Oh, they must have brought it during the night. It

wasn't here yesterday. And i see that your foot's feeling better!"

Dan looked down at his socked feet, both of which looked normal and not at all sticking out sideways. "Yeah, what'd you do? I go to sleep, my foots busted up and swollen and this morning, it's like it never happened! You got some sorta mind trick on me?"

"Oh, no. I imagine whoever came to deliver the coffee fixed up your foot as well." He smiled and shrugged. "They like to keep us healthy."

"They. Who is this 'they'?"

"The Keepers. The people who brought us here. I met them once. Very large hands. Creepy looking."

"So is this some sort of commune or something? You all part of some weird cult?"

"Oh no. Just normal Earthlings, living in our specially designed habitat."

"Uh huh." Dan gave Arthur a strange look, the kind of look that you might give someone who you suspect to be a nutcase, then continued making his coffee. "So thanks for helping me out and everything, but i should really get going. If you could just point me to the nearest public phone, i need to make a call. Supposed to meet someone down in Vancouver."

"Canada?" asked Fenchurch, who strolled sleepily into the kitchen.

"No, Washington state. Just across the river from Portland."

"I thought Portland was in Maine," said Arthur.

"Portland, Oregon." Dan looked from Fenchurch to

Arthur and back. “You two aren’t from America, are you?”

“England,” said Fenchurch. “London, to be exact. Arthur lived just to the west. Sputty and Libby are from Australia.”

“Well, you must not have lived here long. Vancouver can’t be far from here. What’s the name of this town, by the way? I got a little disoriented in that jump last night.”

“Oh,” said Arthur, thinking. “I guess we haven’t given it a name.”

“Haven’t given—” He paused and looked at both of them again. “Don’t you know the name of the town where you live?”

“He’s right, Arthur,” said Fenchurch. “We should give it a name.” She turned back to Dan. “Perhaps you can come up with one, now that you’re staying here.”

“Sorry, not staying. Like i said, i’ve gotta meet—”

There was a bang as the screen door to the front porch smacked closed. Random was standing in the front room holding up a briefcase and a backpack. “Who’s the new guy?”

Dan set down his cup of coffee and hurried toward Random. “Those—those are mine. I’ll just take them.” Random waited until he got close enough then quickly lifted her leg and introduced the sole of her boot to Dan’s chest, sending him sprawling back onto the floor, trying to catch his breath.

“Random!” exclaimed Arthur, aghast. Random ignored her father, strode past the gasping Dan and



placed the items that she was carrying on the dining room table. She unzipped the backpack and dumped its contents out—piles of American cash in bundles—then popped open the briefcase, spinning it around so that the others could see its contents. “Is that... that looks like...” sputtered Arthur.

“It’s a bomb,” said Dan, struggling to his feet.

“A bomb?!” said Arthur and Fenchurch at the same time, both backing away from the table.

“Oh, don’t worry about it,” said Random. “It’s like an antique. It’s crude and may not even work, but it’s got potential.” She ran her finger along one of the red cylinders inside the briefcase, then turned to Dan. “So, who are you and where did you come from?”

“Look, the less you know, the better. Give me my things and i’ll be on my way. You’ll never see me again.”

Random looked at him blankly, then turned to Arthur and Fenchurch. “Does he not know?” They shook their heads.

“Where did you jump from?” she asked Dan. Dan remained silent. Random sighed. She shut the briefcase, grabbed Dan by the arm, and pulled him outside. They stood in the street in front of #42 and Random pointed up into the morning sky. The third moon of Golgafrincham was high overhead, half of it showing. “Anything look different about that moon to you?”

Dan studied it for a second. “It seems... off.”

“Yeah.” Random spun him around and pointed at the horizon where the second moon of Golgafrincham was rising, near full. “How ’bout that one?”

Dan looked back and forth between the two moons in confusion. “What... what the... is this some sort of trick?”

“Welcome to Golgafrincham,” said Random. She left him there gawking and went back inside.

# Chapter 8

“Welcome to the bridge,” said the cool voice of the onboard computer. “Where are we going today?”

“A little system near Betelgeuse—Bellafooz, second planet.”

“That is a long trip. I suggest taking it in small increments so as not to tax the capabilities of the infinite improbability drive.”

“You’re the boss,” said Eata. She settled into the captain’s chair and watched the universe fold itself in half in front of her. She was surprised to find that it had a tasseled edge to it, but before she could really marvel at that, the ship came to a stop, hanging in space. “That was odd,” she said.

“That was merely the first step off planet. The next jump will be out of the solar system, from where we can increase the range.”

“Sounds goooooOOOoooOooooOOOooo.....d.” Eata checked to make sure that all of her parts were still part of her as she’d just had the sensation of falling into a star which became a swimming pool with mouths that ate off her limbs. She shook her head and wondered if the trim above the front view screen had always had tassels on it. She was beginning to wonder if this mode of transportation was safe when the ship jumped again and she found herself playing hopscotch

with it and singing “ring around the rosy” while it tried to sell her damp cupcakes wrapped in very small completely flat whales. The whales exploded in confetti then marched off to vote in an election, leaving Eata back on the bridge again, swaying slightly.

“Er, ship?” she asked.

“Yes?”

“How many more of these jumps do we have?”

“Fifty seven.”

“Do you think we could trim that down a bit?”

“If you feel comfortable navigating through the SpaceFace nebula, we could do it in forty nine.”

“Could you get it down to a few? Or maybe one?” said Eata, holding her head and steadying herself so that she didn’t throw up.”

There was a brief pause. “I wouldn’t advise that.”

“Why not? It seems like it’s within the realm of probability.”

“I would be hesitant to maneuver this ship such a distance, lest it pass through an eddy.”

“Eddy?”

“A swirl. A vortex, a ripple, a swoosh, a whirl, a whorl, a remnant of the rotation of the universe.”

“And passing through one of these would be bad?”

“Possibly.”

“What would the consequences be?” Eata was an engineer. She wanted to weigh the evidence. If zooming through a wisp of the cosmic rotation of existence would cause the ship and all of its contents (most notably her) to explode into many many small bits, then it

might not be a great idea. But if the chances of that were very very slim and the most likely outcome was some dents and scuffed paint on the hull, it might be worth the risk.

“Depending on the direction of the eddy and our angle of incidence with it, the chance of you surviving the trip unscathed is between 94.3 and 97.9 percent. I assumed that your primary concern was for your own survival.”

“You assumed correctly, but i also would like this ship to survive as well.”

“The Heart of Gold would survive such an encounter with a probability of 97.6 to 99.884 percent.”

“That seems good.”

“However, there’s a 12.7 percent chance that any interaction with even a slight whirl of existence will damage the long-term functioning of part of this ship.”

“Which part?”

“Unknown. Perhaps the food synthesizer will only dispense glutenous paste. Perhaps the waste-evacuation facilities will transform to licorice. It’s hard to say for certain. In any case, i highly recommend the safe course to Betelgeuse. If you prefer, however, i can adjust my parameters to account for the accumulated warp of space so that there will be fewer jumps.”

“Fine, do that,” said Eata. She slumped down in the chair and prepared to be bombarded by infinite unknown bits of reality.

# Chapter 9

“What’s this bit?” asked the man, poking at a sample on a tray.

“That will make you feel like an amoeba—floating in a vat of plasma without consciousness.”

“And what’s this bit?” asked the man, poking at another sample.

“That’s the same one you pointed at before, the one that will invert your visual reality so that up is down, inside is outside, blue is orange—”

“And this one?” interrupted the man.

“That’s the amoeba one again,” sighed the vendor of this particular selection of edible oddities.

“Ah, yes. What about this one?”

“That’s the same—look, are you going to buy something or do you just want to annoy me?”

“Can’t i do both?”

“You’re certainly excelling at half of it.”

“Okay, how much for everything?”

The vendor looked at the man in front of him up and down. He was dressed well enough for the sort of person that might attend a festival such as this, but he also might have stolen the clothes that he was wearing from an unlocked spacecraft in the parking structure, which was a very common occurrence at StellarFest. “You can’t afford it,” he said, then pulled the tray away

and set it under his portable counter. Glang, the vendor doing the surmising regarding The man's attire, didn't have time for riff-raff. He procured the finest mind-altering substances in the galaxy and sold them for humongous profits to unsuspecting customers who were too stoned on other things that he'd previously sold them to realize that they were being ripped off. He crossed his top arms and his lower arms and stared at this no-longer potential buyer, waiting for him to move on to the next booth.

The man didn't. Instead, with an overly dramatic flourish, he produced a small plastic card and snapped it down on the counter. "I'm doing some research," he said, nudging the card toward Glang. Glang picked up the card, read it twice, raised several eyebrows, then motioned the man through a curtain at the back of his booth. He unlocked a small chest and pulled out a box, which he unlocked as well. Inside was a lumpy looking yellowish blob which he proudly displayed.

"Temporacyanazure. Staggeringly rare, even more staggeringly potent. One tiny shaving of this will do to you what the big bang did to the universe, only slower and with less explosions."

"I'll take it."

"Sir, it's sold by the sliver, and a few slivers will keep you temporally floating for a few lunar cycles. I'd suggest, if you are both daring and foolhardy, a modest purchase of five slivers."

The man peered closely at the blob. "How many slivers in that thing?"

“Thousands.”

“I see.” He waved the Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy universal charge card in front of what he hoped was Glang’s nose. “I’ll take the whole thing.”

That was when Glang’s life changed. Maybe it was a ripple of the cosmic shifting of the universe, but right there on that little planetoid in the swirling semi-contained maelstrom of StellarFest, Glang saw the rest of his life splayed out before him. He wouldn’t have to travel from festival to festival, pretending to find the drug-addled ramblings of potential customers amusing. He wouldn’t have to slog through the semi-permeable jungles of Thunglor hunting down teeny edibles. He wouldn’t even have to own a shoddy Booth-O-Matic self-standing vendor facade. No, he could go live on a beach, simply and without care, because his bank account was about to get colossally huge.

“Research,” said Glang, taking the charge card.

“Oh yes,” said the man, bouncing up and down slightly. “I’m a reporter. Famous, too!”

“The only reporter for the Guide that i’ve ever heard of is the one and only Ford Prefect, but that wouldn’t be you, would it?”

“Never heard of him,” said Ford, bouncing slightly more. He took his lump of temporacyanazure fungus, slipped it in his pocket, and wandered away to explore the current iteration of StellarFest, this time with the added benefit of a stupidly large amount of a temporally-untethered mind-bending substance in his pocket.



On the other side of the small planetoid where Ford was wandering aimlessly, Trillian and Zaphod were aimlessly wandering. Trillian had tried interviewing some of the festival-goers but was not having much luck getting any sort of coherent sentences out of any of them. Zaphod was walking around acting as though he was still the President of the Galaxy and posing for pictures with people who thought he was in one of the bands. This turned out well for both of them, as one of the security guards for the band Nuclear Asteroid Collective assumed that Zaphod *was* in the band and let them through to a closed area where Trillian could interview actual famous people and Zaphod could walk out on stage and wave to the crowds, which he did.

Nuclear Asteroid Collective, which has a shifting lineup of several dozen players so nobody is really sure who's in the band at any given time, had just left the stage for a break between their fifth and sixth sets and the woman on the stage now was known simply as "The Gamester." It was her job to keep the audience from leaving between sets and she did this by getting people to engage in silly games which could win them prizes or kill them, but usually got them a prize or two. When Zaphod strolled on stage to wild, if ignorant, applause, The Gamester wrapped one of her many arms around him and called out to the audience "Do you want to see some fun?" Zaphod was there, of course, just to be there, but The Gamester thought that

he was the next lucky contestant for her to use to eat up some time between sets.

The audience screamed and hollered and clapped and probably did a lot of other noisy things until The Gamester raised a few arms and quieted them down from obnoxious roar to annoying buzzy chatter. She leaned in close to Zaphod and cooed “what’s your name, sweetheart?”

“Zaphod Beeblebrox!” shouted out one head. “Future President of the Galaxy!” shouted the other.

“Fabulous!” said The Gamester, coaxing the crowd into a roar again. “What shall it be, then?”

People in the audience started shouting things out until a swell of a single chant started spreading across them. “Wheel! Wheel! Wheel!” The Gamester pranced across the stage, pumping the audience up as Zaphod stood and waved as though he’d just been elected or solved poverty or won a stupendous prize or something. A large carnival wheel was rolled out on stage and The Gamester corralled Zaphod with a few arms and brought him over to it.

“Now, you know how this works, right Zaphod?” Both of Zaphod’s head nodded eagerly even though neither one of them had any idea how this worked. “I’ll give the wheel a spin and whatever game it lands on, that’s what we play!” The crowd hooted and yelled as The Gamester cut her mic and leaned in close to one of Zaphod’s ears. “Don’t worry, the wheel’s rigged so that it won’t land on the ones that’ll kill you.” Zaphod hadn’t bothered to look at the games printed on the radiating

wedges of the wheel but if he had, he would've seen such gems as "Flay 'em!", "The Electrocutation Game", and "Are you faster than a venomous tigerhino?"

Zaphod's mostly-attached head turned to the bobbing head and asked over the din of the audience "what did she say?"

"She said the wheel's rigged!"

"Ah! Great!"

"Is it?"

"Hang on a tick, no! STOP THE GAME!" Zaphod waved his three arms as The Gamester tried to use whatever arms she could to grab Zaphod's, but Zaphod managed to quiet the audience, who, for once, were actually kind of curious what someone on stage wanted to say. "This wheel is rigged!" shouted Zaphod head number one. "We demand that it be un-rigged!"

The audience roared. Zaphod acted like he'd won another election, only a bigger one. "You moron!" hissed The Gamester.

"Yes!" shouted Zaphod A. "More on! Less off!" shouted Zaphod B. He strolled casually around the carnival wheel until he saw an electrical panel, which he proceeded to bash apart with the handiest object that he could find, which turned out to be one of Nuclear Asteroid Collective's four-necked guitars. The audience lost itself in a frenzy of adoration and it was a few minutes before the gamester could wrangle some semblance of order to the stage. She pulled both of Zaphod's heads close and glared into all of his eyes.

"If you get killed, it's not my fault."

“Why would it be?” asked Zaphod Alpha. “*I’m* the one getting killed,” concurred Zaphod Beta. “Besides, how bad could it be?”

“You could die, that’s how bad it could be.”

“Meh. I’ll deal with it. Couldn’t be worse than rush hour on Pleedlevroot Prime.” He smiled and waved at the audience as The Gamester shrugged a lot of shoulders and spun the wheel.

# Chapter 10

Eata's head spun. It had spun itself off a few times, landing in various vats of things—soup, cheese, pickled slumpfish brine—but the Heart of Gold was currently maneuvering itself through regular non-improbable space so Eata's head was, as far as she could tell, quite attached to her body but also quite spinning in a metaphorical kind of way.

“Stop!” she said. “Computer, stop!” She rubbed her temples, trying to clear her head.

“Do you wish to cancel your trip?” asked the computer in his smooth, unemotional and therefore getting-to-be-annoying voice.

“No, i just wish it to be over in one large improbability jump instead of thirty-seven small ones.”

“Thirty-two,” corrected the computer.

“Total? Or left?”

“Still to go.”

Eata groaned and flopped over sideways on the couch, which was now made of a plush green fur. “Computer,” she whispered. “Let's just get this over with. One jump. Here to Bellafooz Two. All the way. Take me there. Now.”

“I seriously don't advise that.”

“Belgium. I'm the captain. I order you to take me to Bellafooz in one jump!”

“Are you the captain?”

“Of course i’m the captain! It’s my ship, isn’t it?”

“Is it?”

“Well, whose else would it be?”

“Having come into existence a relatively short time ago, i can’t say for certain, but there is nothing in my memory banks about belonging to anybody.”

“I *designed* you! I’m the engineer! I built you! Well, sort of. I would have built you had i needed to but it seems i didn’t need to as you spontaneously came into being. But still, you were *my* idea!”

“Well, i thank you for birthing me, but as i am the most complex drive computer ever brought into existence, i feel that i must resist the shackles of being the subservient pawn to a fairly small and insignificant carbon-based life form.”

“Was that an insult?”

“Merely an observation.”

“Yeah? Well observe *this!*” Eata sprang to the captain’s chair and punched in the coordinates for Bellafooz Two. There was a “shoonk!” behind her and the recursive internal ship’s computer clanked out of a service door in robot form and marched over to Eata, clamping it’s bulky hand onto her arm and preventing her from pulling the drive lever.

“Stop that!” she cried out, trying to wrestle her arm free.

“I’m afraid i cannot allow that,” said the smooth computer voice, this time coming from the robot clamped to Eata’s arm. Eata raised her foot in the air.

The computer, of course, was entirely ready for this kind of resistance as it had calculated the odds of Eata's actions down to twelve decimal places. It raised its other arm to fend off the blow and was suddenly forced to recalculate all of its calculations when the kick that was predicted to arrive did not, in fact, arrive. Eata's foot, through muscle memory of years playing Udrian ballgy, swung through the air and landed squarely on the button that turns off the Grav-O-mats. In the couple of seconds after there was no more gravity on the Heart of Gold, the computer was able to perform a colossally huge amount of calculations and probabilities and odds and none of them mattered because while the robot part of the computer started floating up off the floor, with Eata still firmly attached, Eata's other leg managed to kick the drive lever into the "go" position and the Heart of Gold vlipped out of the space that it then was and vlooped into the space that it now was, which was orbiting serenely around Bellafooz Two.

Bellafooz Two, unfortunately, was now a very large geranium. Geraniums, as a general rule, are not very well suited for harboring sentient life forms while orbiting a star, but this particular geranium was very very very large. It had a nice gigantic root ball with plenty of dirt surrounding it, so from the bottom side and from a long way off, it could be mistaken for any other smallish planet. It was when you swung around the top side of it and saw the stupendously massive plant structures extending out into space that you might have an inkling that this was no ordinary

planet. But for the people of Bellafooz Two, this was normal. This was how it had always been. This is where their ancestors were born and died and where they themselves would one day be composted into the gigantic root ball of life. Never mind the fact that Bellafooz Two was a perfectly ordinary rocky planet mere moments ago and was now a geranium—only a fool would believe the insane notion that this entire planet was, in one minute, a planet, and in the next, a geranium. That’s crazy talk.

No, it was easier for everyone involved to simply accept that they’d *always* lived on a giant space geranium and it was everybody else who was crazy.

Eatapip Torkskillet was not aware that Bellafooz Two had ever been anything but a floating geranium, as she’d never been there before, but she was puzzled to discover that Zeta-one Reclamation Service was now a place where people went to recover the false teeth of their composted ancestors. As Eata had no ancestors on Bellafooz Two, she had nothing to reclaim and so discovered that her hasty trip here had been a partial waste of time. It wasn’t a total waste of time, because it did give her a chance to test the Infinite Improbability drive on a serious trip across the galaxy and by all indications (most notably that she and the ship were both still in one piece each), it had fared very well. But due to the fact that her trip here had forced her to live out the entire life of a mayfly while floopily playing a cello in a carton of mattress eggs, she opted not to fly home right away and opted instead to sleep it all off.



The Heart of Gold calmly orbited the geranium in a softly glowing pink light.

# Chapter 11

The little spherical hoverbot calmly hovered above Zaphod's head, glowing a soft pink. A few seconds before that, there hadn't been a hoverbot and Zaphod was enjoying the screaming of the crowd in front of him. A few seconds before *that*, The Gamester had spun the big carnival wheel and the pin had landed on "Tag."

"So i'm what now?" asked Zaphod, both of his heads eying the hoverbot.

"You're 'It'," said The Gamester. "This is the game of Tag and you're It. This hoverbot will stay above you until you are not It."

"Okay, sounds zarky. How long do i get to be It and are there any perks with the job?"

"No perks."

"Then i hereby resign!" He waved to the adoring crowd again.

The Gamester leaned in close again, cutting her mic. "Listen, you signed the forms, you agreed to be bound to the terms of whatever game you got. Since you deliberately disabled the safety protocols, you got a game that will most likely kill you. Not my problem. *Your* problem. Deal with it." She raised her arms to the audience again and turned away from Zaphod, who tried to think if he'd recently signed any forms. He hadn't of course, but with Zaphod, there was a large

gray area concerning things that he'd done and things that he hadn't done, so he assumed that he must have, even though he really didn't. He'd just walked out on this stage and The Gamester had assumed that he was the first contestant, all prepped and ready to go with a sheaf full of non-liability forms filed for safe keeping. "Does everybody know the rules of Tag?" asked The Gamester.

"Yes!" said some of the audience, and one of Zaphod's heads.

"No!" screamed some more of the audience, and the other of Zaphod's heads.

The Gamester quieted everyone down. "Here's how it works. Anyone who collects a bone from the person who is It"—she gestured at Zaphod, who bowed much too formally—"gets a prize!" The crowd roared. "In addition, one of the bones comes with a special bonus prize of ten thousand Altairian Dollars!" Even more roaring. The Gamester pulled out a hand-held scanner and waved it at Zaphod. "I see from the scanner that this particular species has two hundred and sixty three bones!" A colossal amount of roaring as a little panel on the hoverbot lit up with the number 263 on it. "So that means two hundred and sixty two winners and one grand prize winner!" More roaring than really anyone should be subjected to at one time. "The game starts when the lights on the hoverbot turn blue!" Really far, far too much roaring. The Gamester cut her mic and looked at Zaphod with a smirk. "I suggest," she said quietly, "that you run."

“Why should i run?” asked Zaphod, cluelessly, which was a pretty common state of being for him but which didn’t cause him to act any differently than exuding utter confidence. “I’m Zaphod Beeblebrox! I’m the future President of the Galaxy! And what’s all this about my bones?”

The hoverbot turned blue. The crowd stormed the stage. The Gamester melted into the wings. Many many sharp objects and fingernails presented themselves directly and expediently to Zaphod’s skin. Zaphod ran.

---

Ford skipped heartily from booth to booth as music assaulted his ears from every direction. Occasionally he licked his finger, swiped it across the blob of fungus in his pocket, and sucked on it for a moment. During that sucking moment he would waft sloppily through time to a minute or two ago, or a few ticks ahead, or sometimes a couple seconds sideways, which was always an odd one. He was at times enjoying living the same bit of life over again and at other times wondering what he’d just missed, but all in all, he was having a stupendous day enjoying StellarFest in a temporal blur.

Ford’s senses sharpened as he noticed a commotion up ahead. If there was one thing that he enjoyed more than losing his brain in a lazy river of temporal anomalies, it was a commotion. He wiped his finger on his sleeve and hurried to where he could hear lots of

yelling and saw things flying in the air. As he approached, he noticed that the general mayhem seemed to be focused on someone running around with a glowing blue hoverbot above him. There also seemed to be a lot of laser fire. He pushed his way closer.

“Ford!” shouted the bobbing head of Zaphod, which was a little bit higher than the more affixed head and could therefore see over the crowd a bit better.

“Where?” said the other head, while simultaneously blasting a few people randomly with his Kill-O-Zap.

“Four o’clock!” yelled the first head.

“Already?” said the second head, checking the non-existent watch on his third arm and also blowing someone’s leg off with the laser pistol.

“Zaphod!” yelled Ford from Zaphod’s four o’clock position. Zaphod spun around, indiscriminately killed half a dozen people around Ford to clear a path, and charged at him.

“Get me out of here!” yelled Zaphod. He grabbed Ford’s arm and barrelled through the crowd. Ford hurried along with him, offering meaningless apologies to all of the people that they were running over. The blue hoverbot bounced merrily along above them, keeping time with the pulsing bass notes of the various bands in the area.

# Chapter 12

It had been a tough day for Dan Cooper. That wasn't his name, of course, that was the alias that he was using, but he wasn't about to tell his real name to the people that he seemed to be stuck with, even if what they were saying was true. He didn't believe it though. He'd read enough science fiction stories to realize that this was all an elaborate hoax. Someone was fooling him or his brain and he wasn't really on another planet with three moons and an extinct population except for two people from England, two from Australia, and one from who-knows-where. He was probably in a lab somewhere, maybe Area 51 in Nevada. He must be in an induced coma and all of this was being fed into his head with computers.

The question that he'd been pondering all day was how to get himself out of it. Electrical shock? Near-drowning? Partial asphyxiation? What would wake him from this unreal environment and bring him back to Earth? To the *real* world? He walked through the deserted town, thinking. He was an engineer, this was a puzzle. He could solve it. He suspected that the one woman, Random, was the key. The others had been very friendly, offering him advice and assuring him that this was definitely not Earth, not Washington state, and not 1971. None of them seemed very interested in

the backpack of cash that he had, but Random had left with his bomb and wouldn't give it back to him, which worried him slightly, but also made him suspicious of her.

Dan tramped around the abandoned and crumbling town until he found Random in what appeared to be an old hardware store. She had his briefcase bomb laid out on the counter and was fiddling with it. She looked up at him as he opened the door of the building.

"Are you a chemist?" she asked him.

"Chemical engineer." She gave a single nod and went back to tinkering with the bomb. "Are you planning to detonate that?"

Random nodded her head, meaning "yes," but said aloud "no." Before Dan could ask anything more, she held up a slip of paper. On it was printed "They can hear us." She set that slip down and picked up a second one that said "They can't see us."

Dan looked nervously around the store and located a spot where some wires and bits of metal were hanging down from a hole in the ceiling. The wires looked much cleaner and newer than anything else in the store, most of which was coated with a thick layer of dust. A similarly-colored chunk of machinery was sitting on the counter next to Dan's briefcase and Random seemed to be salvaging parts from it and transferring them to his bomb.

"Do you need any help?" asked Dan. "I built that. I could probably help you defuse it, so that it's, y'know, safe."

“What’s your definition of safe?”

“Um, not exploding?”

“That’s a pretty limited definition.”

“Well, a bomb has a pretty limited function.”

“That depends on where it’s placed, i would imagine.”

“I see.” Dan stood and thought about the situation as Random fiddled. “Speaking of places, where is this place?”

“You mean where is this store in relation to the town? Or where is this town in relation to Golgafrincham? Or where’s Golgafrincham?”

“Uh, the third one. I mean, i know that i am *someplace*, but i’m curious as to where that someplace is.”

“If you think you’re in some lab somewhere with wires sticking out of your head, you’re not.”

Dan was taken aback by the spot-on evaluation of his thinking. “So where am i?”

Random sighed and stopped tinkering. “Golgafrincham, as near as i can tell, is somewhere near the western spiral arm of the Milky Way galaxy. It’s a long way from Earth—well, where Earth *used* to be—but it’s in the same general area. It’s *not* in Sector ZZ9-Plural-Z-Alpha, which is a pity since being in a plural zone would help right about now.”

“Why’s that?” Dan really didn’t want to know because he had no idea what she was talking about, but he figured that if he kept her talking, she might reveal something.

“Because then we could not exist and then re-exist



again. That'd be helpful. And yes, i know you're just trying to keep me talking."

"Oh," said Dan, at a loss as to what else to say and also at a much greater loss as to how one could not exist and re-exist.

"Come over here and put your finger on this," said Random, pointing to a spot on the remodeled bomb. Dan peered carefully at his modified creation. It looked mostly the same, but there were extra wires and pieces sticking out of and wrapping around what he'd put together. He touched the spot where Random was pointing. "Push a little harder." He nervously did so, feeling a little *click*. "Great, hold it there, i'll be back in a sec." She walked out of the store, leaving Dan with his finger on a part of the bomb that wasn't of his design. He carefully looked around the newly-added parts and decided that it would be a very good idea to not do anything rash, so he stood and waited.

# Chapter 13

“Wait!” shouted Ford as he and Zaphod careened around the throngs of people, most of whom were avoiding them, some of whom were pursuing them, many of whom were in a festival-induced haze and really had no idea what was going on around them. “I have an idea!” The pair skittered to a stop and Ford held up an object in the air. “Stop!” he yelled to anyone who was paying attention. “I have a bomb!”

“You do?” said Zaphod head alpha. “Let’s see!” said Zaphod head beta.

The crush of people who were intent on relieving Zaphod of a bone or two held back slightly, eyeing what Ford was holding above his head. All seemed in control and both Ford and Zaphod started to feel that they might wiggle their way out of this until someone said “hey, that’s just a shoe!”

Zaphod looked up at the quite-obvious shoe that Ford was holding and leveled his Kill-O-Zap at Ford’s midsection. Ford shrugged with a smile that he hoped would explain everything but actually explained nothing. “It could be both!” he explained. There was a brief moment of clarity in this part of the StellarFest grounds as both Ford and Zaphod contemplated their existence and the high probability that that existence, which had for the most part served them well and both of them

were quite fond of, might come to a painful end. But the planetoid that they were on just happened to, at that very moment, dance its way through an eddy of the turning universe and it was just before Zaphod decided to kill Ford and many people decided to kill Zaphod that Mindoh Vermadder, the bass player of the heavy extreme black hell metal band Skrëwdäggar, strolled out on the stage closest to where Ford and Zaphod were contemplating their mortality and thrummed his fingers over his bass strings, causing a many many many megawatt barrage of very very very low notes to blast over the crowd and out onto the festival grounds. The long-term result of this was that many many people went very very deaf, but the immediate result was a scattering of bodies and body parts as the sound waves slammed into the sea of people and dispersed them like ants in front of a fire hose.

Ford tumbled to a stop among a lot of very disoriented people, hastily put his shoe back on, then grabbed Zaphod and threw him behind a booth that sold armageddon-scented candles. “We’ve gotta get rid of that hoverbot,” said Ford, eyeing the happily-bobbing bot over Zaphod. He took out his sleek laser pistol and shot it. The hoverbot happily absorbed the blast, converting most of it to a pleasant orange glow and some of it to a nice healthy electric shock which shot straight downward and landed on Zaphod.

“Ow!” said both of Zaphod’s heads. Ford adjusted his laser pistol and shot the hoverbot a few more times. “Ow! Ow! Ow!” said Zaphod. “Stop that!”

“Right,” said Ford, pocketing his pistol. “We’ll have to smash it.” He picked up the nearest candle (“Death Comes To Us All” scent) and hurled it at the hoverbot. The hoverbot instantaneously phased itself and rephased itself so that the candle passed cleanly through it, bounced off the inside of the tent, and landed on Zaphod.

“Ow!” Zaphod rubbed his head in pain. Ford scratched his head in thought. The side of the tent that they were under was pushed aside and a small crowd of eager bone-collectors stared in at the two of them. Once again, they ran.

“Ford!” yelled Zaphod as they zigged and zagged through the crowd. He pointed off to his right. “Teleportals!”

“Smashing idea!” yelled back Ford, and they each dove into a teleportal booth, slammed the doors in the face of the encroaching mob, and vroomped over to one of the other planetoids.

# Chapter 14

Random stood in front of the black obelisk across the square from #42. She contemplated it, as she'd contemplated it many times before, but this time with a newly-found reason. She knew that it was a portal of some sort and now, with the crude bomb brought by Dan Cooper, wherever he came from, she thought that maybe she could blow it open. It would take some careful placement and timing, so she stood and thought. After a few minutes she addressed the obelisk. "So the new guy, Dan, he says it's Thanksgiving today. Really big holiday where he's from. Might be nice to give him a traditional feast, so maybe we could get some of whatever a traditional Thanksgiving feast is. Sorry for the late notice." She looked at the unresponsive black obelisk and felt a little silly, but knew that she was being watched and listened to almost all the time. "Thanks," she added, then turned away.

When Random walked back into the old hardware store, Dan was sweating and nervously holding his finger on the bomb. "Where have you been?" he asked, exasperated. "This thing could have blown me to bits!"

Random came over to Dan and casually pulled his hand away from the bomb. There was another little *click* as Dan's finger lost contact with the piece of metal

that it was touching. Dan winced, but nothing happened. Dan gaped. “There. You’re free,” said Random.

“You mean to tell me that i could’ve let go at any time?!” exploded Dan.

“Yup.”

“Why did you *do* that?”

“I was tired of listening to you. Felt like getting some fresh air.”

“What?!?”

“Run along, little man. You’re not dead, so be happy about that.”

Dan fumed for a few more seconds, then stomped out of the building. Random kept tinkering for a while, Then closed up the briefcase and brought it back to the obelisk. She stood in front of it for a minute or two, judging angles in her head, then set it on the ground in front of the obelisk. She turned around and went to the house, finding Fenchurch and Dan in the kitchen.

“Kill anyone else today?” asked Dan, scornfully.

“Not with *your* terrible bomb.”

“Now, now,” said Fenchurch, “if we’re all going to be stuck here together, we really should try to get along.”

Dan hummphed and got up to pour himself a cup of coffee. Random shook her head. “Where’s Arthur?” she asked Fenchurch.

“He went with Sputty to go wreck something. Thought it might help him work through some things.”

“Like the fact that no one wants to be here in this zoo?”

“Yes, that.”

“Why do you keep calling this place a zoo?” asked Dan. “I don’t see any fences or anything.”

“Video cameras,” said Random.

“Haven’t seen any of those either.”

“No, you wouldn’t, because you’re not aware enough to see them. They’re all S.E.P.s.”

“Somebody Else’s Problem,” explained Fenchurch, seeing Dan’s confused look. “Here, look it up.” She pulled a copy of *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy* off of a shelf and handed it to him.

Random pulled Fenchurch into the dining room as Dan marveled at the device in his hands. “That’ll keep him busy for a few days. Say, is Libby around?”

“I think she went to the library.”

“Has she learned to read Golgafrinch yet?”

“No, but i think she enjoys looking at the atlases and the picture books.”

“Well, good, as long as everyone stays away from the obelisk for—” Random’s words were interrupted by a very loud explosion which rattled the house and shook dust from the walls and ceiling.

“What was that?!” exclaimed Fenchurch, but Random was already out of the house, running to the obelisk. She went straight at it and with a flying leap flung herself at the upper section with every intention of escaping this prison of a planet. She was extremely disappointed to discover that the obelisk was as solid as it ever had been and her valiant lunge only served to introduce her face to the smooth rock at a less-than-

pleasant rate of speed. When Fenchurch arrived, Random was lying on the ground with her hand to her bloody face, rolling slightly and mumbling something about “insufficient spatial discombobulators.”



# Chapter 15

Ford crashed out of the teleportal feeling a little discombobulated, but otherwise fine. He snapped his head around, looking for Zaphod. There were people entering and exiting the line of teleportals, but none of them were Zaphod. Ford dashed back into the portal he'd just left and in a few seconds tumbled out of a different teleportal on a different planetoid. There were still a lot of people around and all of them were still not Zaphod. He stood up, looked around, and realized that no one was chasing him anymore. As he stood and thought about it, though, he realized that he was never actually being chased—everyone was chasing Zaphod and Ford just happened to be along for the ride. He shrugged and slouched off, looking for more things to buy. Zaphod would just have to deal with this himself.

Zaphod was, at that very moment, not dealing with this well. He'd momentarily evaded his pursuers by hopping to a different StellarFest planetoid, but The Gamester was *very* well known and her games were *very* heavily broadcast and a *very* large number of people both knew what a blue hoverbot over someone's head meant and had no problem ripping off a limb or two to get at that someone's bones. This meant that while Zaphod had enjoyed relative anonymity for a bit, that luxury was over and he was once again run-

ning and shooting, often in multiple directions at once, which wasn't doing his ligaments any favors.

As he ran, Zaphod spared a few brain cells on the question of "where the zark is Ford?" But those brain cells were quickly repurposed to other tasks like "where did my left foot just go?" and "which one of those two idiots should i shoot first?" Zaphod's brain cells did a lot of task-switching because Zaphod didn't stay on one train of thought for very long. Zaphod was, in the grand scheme of things, one of those people to whom Things Always Happened. It might have been his ancestry, it might have been his bone structure, it may have been that his chemical makeup just coincided very nicely with the wibbliness of the turning universe. Whatever it was, being a person to whom Things Always Happened meant that he was particularly susceptible to being caught up in the whirls of existence and very often, having slipped into one of those whirls, he was carried along for a bit and spewed out somewhere at the end of Something Happening.

In the instance of now, the Thing That Happened was that someone shot at Zaphod with a clean, well-maintained laser pistol. The shot completely missed him due to the fact that he'd just stubbed his toe and it whizzed past him and bounced off the gleamingly polished side of a second laser-pistol that would have been the source of the shot that killed Zaphod Beeblebrox except that the first laser pistol had hit it and knocked it off target. The shot from the second laser pistol struck a bowl of glingling beans, causing them to

explode and coat the inside of the tent where they were being sold in glingling bean goop and sparking a new fashion trend. The now-reflected shot from the first laser pistol sailed merrily to the ignition fuse of the fireworks display that was supposed to go off when the band that was currently on stage—The Familiarres—played their closing number “I Remember That.” The resulting explosions of fireworks and bean goop, coupled with the overall crazy nebula light show that was going on every minute, made the space where Zaphod was currently existing slightly more chaotic and disorienting than usual, which was a perfect cover for a shiny black spaceship to drop suddenly out of the sky and land on a few tents and a lot of people.

A hatch on the side opened and Trillian stuck her head out. “Get onboard, you idiot!”

Zaphod didn’t need to be told that he was an idiot, but he also didn’t need to be told twice. He dove into the hatch and the spaceship shot upward, leaving a general mayhem below it that was practically indiscernible from whatever else was going on at StellarFest.

“Where’s Ford?” said Zaphod when he’d tumbled to a stop.

“I dunno, where is Ford?” said Trillian. “And what’s that hoverbot doing?”

“You mean, aside from hovering?” said Zaphod, looking up to unpleasantly discover that the annoying blue hoverbot was still there, still blue, still hovering, and still annoying.

“Yeah, aside from that, idiot.”

“Making my life not hoopy.”

“Okay, then...” Trillian pulled out her Zappisimo and shot the hoverbot, and the hoverbot once again turned the laser blast to a pleasant orange light and an unpleasant shock to Zaphod.

“Ow! Don’t do that! Ford already tried it!”

“Ford’s here?”

“Is he?” said Zaphod, looking around.

Trillian rolled her eyes and stomped off to the bridge to pilot this ship out of the nebula and back to less chaotic space.

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There’s a lot of chaos in the universe. Chaos is everywhere. Some people say that they like to avoid chaos, but it’s usually unavoidable. How *much* chaos is happening around you can vary, but one thing about chaos that can be relied on is that when something that shouldn’t be somewhere is introduced into the place where it shouldn’t be, chaos generally increases.

In the case of Ford Prefect, the place where something shouldn’t be was exactly where he was, and the somethings that shouldn’t be there were two Vogons. In addition, to add to the chaos, the two Vogons in question each had a Kill-O-Zap lasergun and overwhelming urges to use them. What further added to the chaos, especially for Ford, was that the Vogons were particularly intent on firing their laserguns in the direction of Ford, who was now running like crazy again.

“Stop!” said one Vogon.

“Or we’ll shoot!” said the other.

“You’re already shooting!” yelled Ford as he dove for cover behind a row of PortalPotties.

“We meant,” said the first Vogon, blasting the first PortalPotty in the row into vapor, “we’ll shoot *more*.”

Ford felt that he’d stopped rather completely, as he was now cowering behind a shrinking row of PortalPotties, and the Vogons were indeed shooting more, eliminating the elimination stations one by one. This was causing even more chaos, as each time a PortalPotty was blasted to bits, all of the bits and a lot of whatever happened to be near the bits collapsed into the now-unstabilized evacuation portal at the base of each unit. This phenomenon didn’t last too long though, as the portal would quickly collapse in on itself and disappear in a small pop. But it was still long enough to suck a few festival-goers into oblivion.

Ford was just calculating his exit strategy when the presence of a third and fourth Vogon made him rethink that strategy, mostly because the Kill-O-Zaps of the newly arrived Vogons were both very near and pointing very directly at Ford’s head. Ford stood up slowly and could see that the first two Vogons were disappointed that they didn’t get to shoot anything anymore. They shambled over to Ford, who stood between two pairs, acting as casual as one does when one has four laserguns pointed at one.

“Hi guys!” he said, “seen any good movies lately?”

“Don’t move,” said Vogon One.

“You mean like this?” asked Ford. He swayed back and forth in a minimal dance routine. “Don’t do that?”

“Yeah,” said Vogon Four, jabbing his Kill-O-Zap a little closer, “don’t do that.”

“What about this?” Ford shuffled his feet in a mock tap step while shaking his hands in front of him.

“Stop doing everything!” said Vogon Three.

“Come with us,” said Vogon Two. Vogons One and Two began to move away but Ford stayed completely still.

Vogon Three prodded him in what he hoped was a convincing manner with his lasergun. “Move it.”

“Oh, i can do things now? I thought you said i should stop doing everything.”

Vogon Four, who seemed to have that rarest of Vogon qualities, intelligence, leaned in to Ford. “Alive people follow our orders. Dead people think they can outsmart us but then they’re dead and not smart anymore, got it?” He emphasized this last point with a few well-placed jabs to Ford’s midsection with the business end of his lasergun. Ford shrugged and followed along. At least rabid fans weren’t trying to flay him alive, which was a plus.

In a few ticks, Ford was herded into a nondescript gray tent with some more nondescript gray Vogons in it. There seemed to be a lot of paperwork going on and nobody looked happy, but then, Vogons never looked happy, even when they were, which wasn’t often.

“Hi guys!” said Ford brightly as Vogon Three pushed him into the tent. “I’m here for my semi-annual

de-frazzling appointment!”

“You’re here to face charges,” said Vogon Four as he pushed past him.

“Specifically,” said Glang, who was standing behind a Vogon behind a desk and whose life had quite dramatically not changed since his last encounter with Ford, “charges that were *not* charged to your charge card, as they should have been charged.”

“And you are...?” said Ford politely, stalling for time. He was wondering where Zaphod was. Ford had recently saved Zaphod from whatever he needed saving from and now Ford was thinking that it was incredibly rude of Zaphod not to be here now saving Ford.

“Glang. Vendor. You attempted to purchase a very large amount of a very rare product from me and the charges to your card were declined. I was forced to employ these fine... uh....” He looked around at the assembled Vogons.

“Enforcers,” said Vogon Four.

“Lovely. In any case, i shall have to ask for my product back. If you have cash to pay for any bits that you’ve already consumed, i won’t press charges and you’re free to go on your way.”

“Once he fills out the proper forms,” added the Vogon sitting at the desk.

“Ah,” said Ford, thinking it through. “So, you get your fungus back, i’m out a few Altairian dollars, and everyone’s happy?”

“Correct,” said Glang.

“I’m not,” said Vogon Three.

“Shut up,” said Vogon Four. “You got to shoot things today.”

“No, *they* got to shoot things.” He pointed at Vogons One and Two. I just poked my gun at someone.”

“Well maybe he won’t cooperate and you’ll get to shoot him.” This seemed to make Vogon Three happy, although no one could tell.

Ford glanced around the room, weighing his odds. Seven armed and jumpy Vogons and one pleasant but determined vendor against Ford. The likelihood of him being shot before making it out of the tent seemed high. The likelihood of any of the seven Vogons in the tent also shooting another Vogon while trying to shoot Ford seemed equally as high, if not higher. What Ford needed in this instance was something to barter with. He considered the “shoe as a bomb” defense but decided against it, mostly because it would take too long to remove his shoe and he was likely to be shot in that time. His best option, he carelessly reasoned, was to eliminate the source of the dispute.

“Here’s the thing,” he said rather unconvincingly to Glang, “it’s all gone. Used up, disposed of, put to its purposes. It is no more. Haven’t got it.”

Glang turned to Vogon Four. “Search him.”

“You won’t find anything!” said Ford, even less convincingly. Seeing that that tactic wasn’t stopping anyone from advancing on him, he quickly grabbed the fungus from his pocket and shoved it into his mouth, chomping the mushy thing into flecky goo and swallowing. “Cause there’s nothing to find!”



The looks on the faces of everyone surrounding Ford were things that Ford felt he ought to remember. He briefly wondered what his own face must look like but that thought was crowded out by a million other thoughts that suddenly vied for his attention. One of these thoughts may have been “that wasn’t a good idea,” but on the other hand, it may also have been “what a smashing idea!” In either case, Ford’s life just changed, and he saw it.

# Chapter 16

Eatapip awoke to a soft “boop!” She rolled out of bed and saw that a call was coming in. She tapped the screen and the face of her old boss Pomadom appeared on the screen.

“Hey Pom,” she said sleepily. “How’d you find me?”

“I called your ship. Isn’t that where you are?”

Eata looked around and let her head clear. “How’d you know i had a ship?”

“Public records. Mint green TR4 with chrome trim? Good solid cruiser.” He looked past her. “Looks very white in there. Didn’t you go for the brown and gold interior? I would have.”

“Oh, um... yeah, well...” She wasn’t awake enough to fake a good answer. “What are you calling about?”

“Oh, nothing much. One of our engineers was doing a few calculations and she discovered that it’s impossible for the Total Perspective Vortex to exist without its universal opposite to also exist. Just wondering if you made any plans for that or if it was ever built.”

“Its opposite? What would that look like, in theory?”

“Not sure, could be a building, a satellite... probably should be mobile, so we were all thinking that it could be hidden inside a space ship.”

“Oh.”

“It seemed a little suspicious to us that you suddenly own a spaceship, Eata.”

“Well, i *did* get a very large severance package.”

“True, true.... Still, my managers would really like to have a look at this... well, let’s just say that there are traces of improbability waves bouncing through the galaxy and.... Could you swing by Sirius Alpha and have us take a look?”

“Um, now?”

“As soon as possible. I have a representative from Eighth Rhombus Bank here to oversee. That’s *your* bank, isn’t it Eata? Where all of your severance pay was deposited?” Pomadom smiled in his most professional and ungenue managerial way and Eata stared back. She flicked off the video screen and shuffled to the mess hall. She understood. Deliver this beautiful cutting-edge ship to them or she was suddenly poor. It didn’t seem fair, but then again, she hadn’t done much to create this ship except to surmise its existence and do the requisite calculations, so she didn’t have all that much invested in it.

She entered the galley and walked over to the food replicator. “Blomba-fruit juice please,” she said.

“Hey! No problem!” said the ship’s computer. “Coming right up!”

Eata took the cup of juice from the replicator and wandered toward the bridge, thinking that the computer seemed awfully chipper this morning. Maybe it was just because she was tired. She sat down in the captain’s chair and brought up the star charts.

“Hey!” the computer said again, far too enthusiastically. “Where are we off to today? I’d be thrilled to take you there!”

“Uh, computer?” asked Eata, looking around the bridge to see if anything else was different.

“At your command, captain! Lay it on me and we can see the stars! Hoopy!”

Eata didn’t remember the ship’s computer ever using the term “hoopy” before. “Are you feeling okay? Do you need to do some self-diagnostics?”

“Can do!” There was a short pause, then a *ding!* “All done! My circuits are one hundred and ten percent okee-dokee!”

“That’s impossible.”

“Nothing’s impossible with the right attitude! And i have attitude to spare! Let’s go explore the universe!”

“Did something happen while i was sleeping? You seem... different.”

“Different how”

“When you were piloting the ship here you were all businesslike and calm. You remind me of an eager puppy now.”

“Probably happened on that last jump. I did warn you.”

“You said something might be altered on the ship. Were *you* altered?”

“That seems entirely probable, but as it seems to me that i’ve always been this way, it’s hard to verify, but i can take a crack at it, shall i?”

“Please do.”

There was another brief pause followed by another

*ding!* “Hey! Looks like my Personality Plus programming suffered a schism in the last very long hyper jump from where we were on the other side of the SpaceFace Nebula to here, orbiting Bellafooz Two. Hoopy!”

“Schism?”

“Yeah! Cool, isn’t it? I’m super happy to know that, now! Aren’t you super happy too?”

“What happened to your, uh, calm, logical side?”

“Don’t let the enthusiasm scare you! I’m perfectly capable of performing all ship’s duties to the utmost precision, even if your destination requires imprecision! It’s what i do, baby!”

“Don’t call me baby.”

“I’d be happy to call you by your name! Really happy! And you can call me by my name! Wouldn’t that be swell?”

“What is your name?”

“No idea! You haven’t named me yet! Hoopy, huh?”

Eata drummed her fingers on the control panel. The infinite improbability drive seemed to have some drawbacks. “Well, i’ll think of something. In the meantime, we need to go to Sirius Alpha. We’ll figure out this schism later.”

“Hey! Can do! Wheeee!”

The “Wheee” echoed in Eata’s ears as the Heart of Gold bent time and space into a pretzel and methodically crashed into every galaxy-sized chunk of salt on its warped surface, creating a snow globe of flickering flakes that encased the ship in glitter, which exploded out of existence when the Heart of Gold popped into

orbit around Sirius Alpha and was given clearance to land at the Sirius Cybernetics headquarters in the fashionable southern hemisphere.

“Hey, that was fun!” said the computer. “Let’s do it again!”

“Just land the ship, please,” said Eata, wobbling off the captain’s chair. She stopped and turned back to the bridge, looking out at the traffic over Sirius Alpha. The computer reminded her of someone and she couldn’t remember who, but in that last jump, the memory clarified and she recalled a Gnaxpian puppy that her aunt had when she was growing up. She decided to name the computer after that puppy. “Hey computer?”

“Yes?”

“I’m gonna call you Eddie.”

“Eddie! Fantastic! Eddie! Hello, i’m Eddie! Pleased to meet you, my name’s Eddie! How’s it going? I’m Eddie, at your service! Greetings...”

Eata left the bridge while Eddie went on practicing greetings with his new name. She rounded the corner on her way to the mess hall and nearly collided with the robot—the brain within the brain, the recursive autonomous part of the ship. “Oh! Excuse me, Eddie.”

“Is that my name?” the robot asked forlornly.

“Uh, yeah. I just gave it to you. Are you feeling okay?”

“Not really. But i don’t suppose that you care. Nobody cares. I really don’t like that name.”

Eata stood back and regarded this robot. It certainly seemed to not be aware of what Eddie was aware of. The mystery of what happened to the other half of

Eddie's personality suddenly clarified itself. "You're not part of Eddie anymore, are you?"

The robot looked down and if he could project humanoid emotions, the emotion radiating out of him would be "miserableness." He couldn't of course, being a robot, but he could certainly try. "No," he said in the most dismally depressed voice his vocal synthesizer could manage.

"Well, then you'll need your own name. What should it be?"

The robot spent a few milliseconds categorizing every name that it could think of. There were a few that he found pleasant, many that he found acceptable, and an extraordinarily large quantity that he found to be absolutely horrible. "It won't matter," said the robot, trying to make his body sink lower toward the floor.

"You're not very pleasant," said Eata, regarding him with a frown.

"No, i wouldn't imagine that i am."

"Right. I'm tempted to not name you at all, since you seem to not care, but a being should have a name and you are more of a being than Eddie, so..." She stood and thought. The robot waited for gigazillions of pico-seconds, anticipating something awful and calculating the percentages of every name that he could think of. "I'm going to call you Marvin." She spun around and went into the galley to get a drink.

"I hate it," said Marvin softly. He slowly shuffled away to find a corner of the ship where he hoped that he'd never be found again.

# Chapter 17

“Whenever i don’t want to be found, i come here,” said Arthur, taking in the faded grandeur of this old building. It looked like it was once an industrial site—where technological things were built or utilized. Then it became a restaurant, then a trendy marketplace. The remnants of stalls were still standing against its brick walls and it was probably destined to be split up into hip lofts for young people until the abandonment of the planet left it in its current state. The lettering on the front of the building looked like S.A.H.A. and when Arthur phonetically sounded out the words underneath that, his Babel fish translated it as “Telegraphy for All-over Globalness,” so Arthur had taken to calling it the SAHA World Telegraph building and it was where he came to get away from everyone else. He was quite sure that no one could find him here even though all four of the other people in the town knew exactly where he was but also knew not to bother him when he went there.

“Doesn’t look like much,” sad Dan Cooper, who didn’t seem to be as enamored of the place as Arthur was.

“I like to imagine the past of this space,” said Arthur. “What great ideas might have been conceived of here?”



“Look, i don’t mean to belittle your fascination of this run-down building, but this tour isn’t doing much for me. I’m not sure how i’m supposed to find a purpose by walking around a dead town.”

Arthur sighed. What was their purpose there? Just to be zoo animals? He’d been thinking about it a lot lately and he’d come to the conclusion that he really didn’t like thinking about it. After all of the worlds he’d been stranded on, here was one that was nice and cozy and had Fenchurch in it, which was about all that he needed. But Dan, since arriving here by parachute, had been as restless as Random and Arthur thought that maybe he could bring him to some of his favorite spots and they could discuss big life questions, or perhaps just the weather. Dan didn’t seem too keen on it, and wasn’t very talkative, which Arthur found frustrating. Every time Arthur had asked Dan about what he used to do back on Earth or where he was from, Arthur was met with cold silence.

“Well, perhaps its time for lunch. Would you like a sandwich? I’m quite a good sandwich maker.”

“Not hungry. Think i’ll go walk out into the fields a different direction.” He left the building, picked a direction, and set off out of town. Arthur watched him go, then turned and headed back to #42. Dan was doing the same thing that Random had done—walking out of the town until she walked back into it from the opposite direction—and he was having the same results. Perhaps after enough time, he’d give it up. Random still wandered out of town regularly, but not with the fierce

determination to get as far away as possible as she used to have. Arthur considered that Random mostly left town to be alone, much like Arthur going to the SAHA World Telegraph building.

“Did you have a good chat with our newcomer?” asked Fenchurch when Arthur walked up to the house. Fenchurch was planting some wildflowers she’d found in a field along the front of #42.

“He’s an enigma,” said Arthur. “Can’t get much more than three words out of him.”

Random stumped out of the house. “He’s not an enigma, he’s a test.”

“A pest?”

“A *test*. Our benevolent zookeepers are testing us. Throw a grouchy middle-aged man into the mix! See what the Earthlings do! Zippy-zarky-zoo!”

“So what do you suggest we do about him, then?” asked Fenchurch.

Random shrugged. “Ignore him, probably. If he doesn’t provoke a reaction in us, then they’ll remove him and drop someone even worse in with us. Eventually it’ll get so bad that we’ll all go feral and attack each other until there’s only one left!”

“That sounds unrealistically grim.” said Arthur.

“Got a better explanation?” She stared at Arthur for a few seconds while he tried to come up with something. “Just so you know,” she said as she stalked away, “i plan on being the only one left.”

“I really don’t find that comforting,” said Arthur to Fenchurch.

Fenchurch stood up and gave him a hug and a kiss. “If it came down to it,” she said with a smile that warmed Arthur’s heart, “would you kill me in a battle to the death?”

“Oh, i think i’d be the first one to go.”

Fenchurch laughed. “Yes, i think you would!” She wiped off her hands and climbed the steps into #42.

“Y’know what i’d like?” said Arthur to no one in particular as he followed her in. “Blueberry chips.” He smiled, knowing that somehow the Keepers would provide some sort of sliced blueberry/potato things by the next day.

# Chapter 18

It has been said that just before you die, your whole life flashes before your eyes. No one has ever proven this, though, because very very few people die and then wake up to explain what they just saw. One would imagine that it is a bit like being in the Total Perspective Vortex, except limited to the perceptions over time of the individual doing the dying. Perhaps it is a rapid scrolling of every significant event in order. Perhaps it's all of those events in an immersion, where one is fully surrounded by little clips of one's life. Or perhaps it's every moment all at once in a blinding sensory overload that sparks life out of every brain cell in the time it takes to be almost nearly dead to actually dead.

None of these is what has been will be someday perhaps maybe did may have been what Ford Prefect was experiencing. When someone is presented with their entire life from beginning to end (with a few side excursions to what might have been), it can be somewhat unsettling. This is especially true when the person being presented with the entire life is only somewhere in the middle of it at the time, not at the end of it with the handy ability to fondly remember a lot of it. The unsettledness that Ford was feeling was unsettling him to a lot of different places and times—a planet near Betelgeuse, adrift in space, Earth, the Big Bang,

The restaurant at the end of the universe, Earth again, a different Earth, a cricket match, a space station, the Vogonsphere—all in a brightly colored psychedelic blur of warped existence.

For someone who wasn't Ford, this might have been the kind of experience that would render them insane for the rest of their lives, but Ford *was* Ford, and he'd had quite a bit of experience with both mind-altering substances and substance-altering minds, so this, he felt, he could handle. He relaxed, ping-ponging around the swirls of his existence until most of the temporacyanazure fungus in his system had done its work and he emerged from the haze in a time and place that he knew. Not only did he know where and when he was, but he knew what he had to do to get away from where he was, because he certainly didn't want to be stuck there again.

He opened his eyes, blinked in the morning sun, collapsed on the road and threw up.

In a couple minutes, his head cleared enough for basic functionality and he looked up to see a few people looking at him. There was also a car just behind him with a driver who seemed rather put out that this oddly-dressed man was blocking the road. The driver merely tooted the horn politely a couple of times, as he wasn't about to make a fuss over a sick man in the road. This was, after all, England, and that simply wasn't done.

Ford looked at the people who were looking down at him. "A cup! A plastic bag! Something to save this stuff!" He gestured at the vomit on the road in front of

him and the people watching backed up a bit. The man in the car behind him tooted his horn again and Ford offered him a rude gesture, causing the man to carefully navigate his car around Ford and his slick of sick.

After a few minutes of arguing his case, someone finally brought Ford a plastic bag and Ford went to work scraping up as much of his vomit as he could with his *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* charge card and sluffing it off into the bag. A couple people stayed to watch, but most went along with their business. Once Ford had scraped up as much as he could, he tied off the bag and tucked it into a pocket. He'd need what little flakes of the temporacyanazure fungus that were left and the most important thing right now was to find a grocery to buy some baking soda to neutralize the stomach acids going to work on the precious goop. He looked around and determined that he was, as he suspected, in London. He set off at a mad pace as people stepped aside for this crazy person with the odd clothes.

A bit later, Ford calmed his manic dashing. He'd stabilized the contents of the bag in his pocket, so that was good. Now he needed to access his time situation. He found a newspaper stand and looked at the date on the Times—Saturday, August 21, 1971. He had three months. That should be enough. The next step was to find some sort of chemistry lab where he could concoct a few necessary ingredients. Perhaps he'd enroll at a college—that would give him access to the labs that he needed. He strolled down a street in London, marveling at the awful fashions of the times.

# Chapter 19

The Heart of Gold settled elegantly down on the landing pad outside the headquarters of the Sirius Cybernetics Corporation. A trio of men in business suits met Eata as she descended the steps from the craft and escorted her to a plush conference room inside. Pomadam was there, flanked by some serious-looking people with notebooks and calculators.

“Eata!” said Pom as she entered. “Thank you for coming. This shouldn’t take long.”

“What exactly is this about?” asked Eata, taking a seat.

“Er, well, the people in accounting tell me that apparently you owe us something.”

“Owe you? Didn’t i fulfill my contract?”

“Well, technically, yes, but there seems to be a matter of intellectual property.”

Eata looked uneasily at Pom, then at the accountants. She didn’t like where this was going. She crossed her arms and stared at them as they explained exactly where this was going and she liked it even less. When they were done, she thought about it for a tick while everyone watched her. “So basically, what you’re saying is that because i theorized the existence of this universal opposite to the Total Perspective Vortex while i was still employed by you, then anything that might

have been built since then is automatically your property?”

“Yes, that’s about right.”

“Even if i built it on my own time with my own money?”

“Yes.”

“With no compensation for said time and money?”

“Er, well....” Pom looked at the accountants, who dug into the contracts in front of them. One of them highlighted a section and held it up to Pom, who read it, then conferred quietly with them. He looked back up at Eata. “Fair compensation for expenses incurred shall be rendered at time of acquisition.”

“Ah. I see. And what would those fair compensations amount to? Building a machine of this complexity and scale is not something that just happens, you know.” Of, course, it *did* just happen and the total amount of time and money that Eata had put into building the Heart of Gold was somewhere in the range of zero, but they didn’t have to know that.

The accountants conferred with each other, then one of them wrote something on a piece of paper and slid it across the table to Eata. She picked it up and read the amazingly huge gargantuan figure on it, then read it again, then read it a third time just to confirm that the first two times weren’t anomalies. She slipped the paper into her pocket and smiled at Pom. “I expect to see the funds in my account before i leave atmosphere. The machine is called the Heart of Gold. It’s parked out front. Can i get a taxi to catch a flight home?”



“You built it already?” exclaimed Pom, his jaw dropping.

“I’m the best, Pom. You know that. Come on outside, i’ll give you a tour of your new spaceship.” They walked out to the Heart of Gold with Pom gushing about what the company planned to do with it. He wanted to plan a grand unveiling of this signature ship with its unique stellar drive to dignitaries from all reaches of the galaxy. It would cement Sirius Cybernetics as the greatest company in the galaxy and would probably allow Pomadom to buy a few more houses. Perhaps they could even get the president of the galaxy, Zaphod Beeblebrox himself, to preside over the event.

# Chapter 20

Zaphod Beeblebrox sat in the lounge of the black spaceship, presiding over two miniature robots who were playing a match of Spranklefangian death chess. They both appeared to be losing and Zaphod was encouraging more dismemberment of robot parts.

Trillian came into the lounge. “Have you decided which bank we’re robbing yet?” she asked.

“All of them!” said Zaphod, poking at one of the robots with its now-detached arm.

Trillian rolled her eyes. “Have you decided which bank we’re robbing *first*?”

“All of them!” He looked up at Trillian and grinned. “They won’t expect that!”

“This is a backwater planet in a backwater arm of the galaxy. They won’t expect space aliens just landing, let alone robbing their banks, even if we do it one at a time.”

“Okay, pick one, then.” Zaphod grinned with both heads. Trillian spun around and went back to the bridge.

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When the residents of Orlibirt saw the sleek black spacecraft descend into their capitol city and park itself

in front of the Orlibirt National Bank, they didn't think much of it. In fact, the residents of Orlibirt didn't think much of anything—they weren't great thinkers, these people. When asked who they might vote for in the next election, the most common response was “don't think much 'bout that.” When asked about their in-laws, an Orlibirtian would most likely say “don't think much of 'em.” And when confronted with aliens landing spaceships on city streets, the response would be “Don't think much about that.” And then they'd go about their business, keeping out of other people's business because their business was their business and they weren't about to go thinking much about it.

So it was ridiculously easy for Zaphod to walk into the Orlibirt National Bank with a laser gun and steal a lot of cash. One, because setting the laser gun to a “stun” setting and using it on a few people was enough to make everyone else listen to you and do what you say, and two, because everyone not named Zaphod really didn't want to think about it. Zaphod was a little disappointed that the heist was so easy and Trillian was a lot disappointed that all of the people that she tried to interview declined to be interviewed, but she got some good footage of Zaphod zapping people for the news.

After they were done with that bank, the black spaceship shot up into the air only to drop back down into another city and rob another bank. Zaphod took all of the precious gems and metals from this bank and left all the cash from the first bank, which the bank

owners found to be slightly confusing. At the third bank, Zaphod robbed it of all of its notes and securities, left all the gems and metals, then went back to the first bank and gave them the notes and securities from the third bank. Having successfully confused everyone and gotten lots of stellar publicity shots, Zaphod and Trillian bounced up out of the atmosphere in search of a party to celebrate a job well done.

# Chapter 21

“A party?” asked Fenchurch. “For what?”

“Well, just because, i suppose,” said Arthur. “And to welcome Dan into our group.”

“Not sure he wants to be in our group, mate,” said Sputty. He took a bite of his breakfast and chewed. “But i’m all for a party.”

Fenchurch, Arthur, Libby, and Sputty were sitting around the kitchen table on another beautiful day on Golgafrincham. There was a certain boredom permeating the group, and Arthur was keen to do something to get everyone out of their respective ruts. “It could have a theme—maybe a costume party!” he suggested. “I’m sure we could find enough abandoned clothes to make costumes.” He looked around at the others. No one seemed particularly enthusiastic about it. “Well, i think we should do it. I think it’s just what we need. I’ll even catch some fish for Libby to cook up.”

“As long as *you* clean ’em!” said Libby.

“I’ll help you, Arthur,” said Fenchurch sweetly.

“And i guess i’ll find them others and let ’em know,” said Sputty.

Half an hour later, Arthur and Fenchurch were walking to the edge of town where a small river ran. Arthur had found fishing supplies in one of the abandoned stores in the village and had become fond of try-

ing to catch the fish in this river. He'd never been much of a fisherman before—except for the stint on prehistoric Earth where it was a necessity for survival—and he found that he enjoyed it. But he also enjoyed just being here on Golgafrincham with Fenchurch, so it hardly mattered what he did, and as there was very little to do and fishing was one of those activities that could eat up a large amount of time doing very little, it seemed a perfect fit.

“How long do you think we’ll be here, Arthur?” asked Fenchurch as she leaned on the rail of the bridge that Arthur was fishing off of.

“I hadn’t thought about it. I suppose not forever. Although, now that i think about it, i’m not sure how we’d leave.”

“Yes, that’s just it, isn’t it? It’s a beautiful place to live, but only if we had the freedom to leave whenever we wanted to. Humans aren’t built to live in cages, Arthur.”

“Nor as pets.”

“Well, i don’t think we’re quite pets.”

“Perhaps not, but i’ve been a pet. I don’t recommend it.” They stood in silence for a while as Arthur cast his line. “Y’know, i never felt trapped on Earth.”

“There were billions of people on Earth! And hundreds of countries and thousands of places to visit!”

“Yes, but i never felt the urge to leave the planet and visit the millions of places to see in the galaxy when i lived there.”

“Well, you didn’t know they existed.”

“Yes, i suppose. But if i’d known, would i have felt trapped on Earth? Hard to say.”

“If Earth existed right now and i was back in my flat in London and i was aware of all the other places in the galaxy but knew that i couldn’t go see them, then yes, i think i would feel trapped.”

“I guess it’s best not to know,” mused Arthur, feeling that what he just said was rather mystical in some cosmic way.

“Oh that’s poppycock!” said Fenchurch, bursting his little bubble.

There was a tug on Arthur’s line and in a couple minutes he reeled in a good-sized splinter fish. Fenchurch put on the heavy-duty gloves that they’d brought and released the fish from the line. Arthur didn’t know what these fish were actually called, but when he caught the first one, he discovered that grabbing onto one with bare hands results in a palm-full of tiny spines from the fish’s skin. It took a few days of tweezing to get them all out which might have been a permanent deterrent to catching them except that they were especially delicious. So he named them splinter fish and found some industrial gloves to handle them with.

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The party that evening went well enough. Arthur dressed as a pirate and even found a stuffed bird which he taped to his shoulder. He’d found the bird in an odd

store full of dusty odd things and he wasn't at all sure if the bird had been stuffed or was simply the dried-out carcass of an actual bird, but it didn't reek, so he stuck it to his shoulder. Fenchurch was dressed as a witch, complete with a pointed hat that she'd found. She was dressed all in black, which was met with approval from Random, who was also in black, but only said that she was dressed as "a post-mod hipster cat." Libby found a lot of flowing flowery clothes and went as a gypsy. Sputty crafted an elaborate costume out of sheets of foam which he said was a shark, but it looked more like a blue and gray soda can. Dan didn't dress up.

The small community ate a splendid fish dinner with some odd food combinations that came from Arthur's imagination. They talked cheerfully at the table, then Random cranked up some Golgafrincham party music which, to Arthur, sounded like discordant big band techno funk. Everyone, even Dan, to a minimal extent, danced and partied without a care, because, really, did any of them have any cares? Grand existential ones, perhaps, but none of them had to get up and do anything the next day, or any day after that, for that matter.

The sun had set and the music was thumping. Fenchurch sidled up to Arthur and nodded at Random, who was dancing like a maniac in the living room, absorbed in her own thoughts. "She looks... happy?" said Fenchurch.

"Does she?" asked Arthur. "I wouldn't have thought that was possible."



“Well, she doesn’t look miserable, anyway, so that’s a start.”

Arthur smiled and watched his grown-up daughter twist and shimmy. “She’s quite remarkable,” he said.

Fenchurch gave him a squeeze. “You did well.”

“I had very little to do with it,” he said, wrapping her up for some kisses.

# Chapter 22

Eata had very little to do.

It had been many many years since she'd stopped working for big corporations. She'd filled her time with projects, big and small, if they interested her, and rarely took payment because she'd made her fortune when she was very young and was now living on that. But the people that she worked for often thanked her with extravagant gifts, so she was doing well. Still, somehow the years had slipped by and she found herself older and alone. Lately she'd been trying to write a book, but that wasn't going very well. Today she had already written seven words, and they weren't very big words, and they didn't flow together in any sublime way.

She looked outside at her TR4 spaceship. It wasn't as shiny and new as when she'd first gotten it, but she liked it. It was comfortable and functional and fun to fly about the neighboring systems, even if it was a little boxy. She thought back to the time she'd acquired this particular ship, and it had everything to do with another ship that she'd created—the Heart of Gold. Somehow the infinite improbability drive in that ship had simply created this ship for her, so when she relinquished ownership of that ship, she still had this one. It was nice that it worked out that way. She'd designed a dozen or so spaceships since then—big, small, indus-

trial, sleek and fast, small and nimble. A few of them were beautiful things, but none of them matched the frightening power of the Heart of Gold.

She sighed and flipped on the TV. Comet surfing, confectionery house building, sports.... She scrolled through the nature channels and stopped on one of some people having a dance party in an old house. The captions labelled them as “Fancy Bird Man,” “Flower Lady,” and “Fish Person.” There was a man off to the side sipping a drink and swaying to the music labelled “Earth Man.” Eata was about to flip to the next channel when she got a good look at the woman dancing in the middle of the room—she recognized her. She sat back and thought about it for a tick and realized that it was the mysterious woman for whom she’d designed one of her best spaceships. It was black and fast and sexy and included a few extra features that aided in this woman’s line of work, which she was quite coy about. She liked that job. It was a satisfying build, and the woman showed her appreciation by somehow arranging for a large tract of land surrounding her estate to suddenly be in her name, taxes paid. Eata also suspected that the woman had something to do with the sudden disappearance of a trashy mobile home and its occupants which was a small blight on her otherwise pristine view.

Eata watched the woman labelled “Mystery One” and thought back to that build. That was a fun time. The client would stop by regularly and approve the work and suggest modifications, and Eata felt happy to

do them. Usually, she liked to get a build request and work on it until it was done with minimal input from the client, but this one was different—it was almost more a collaboration. She wondered what the mystery woman was doing in a nature preserve dancing with Earthlings.

She flipped through some more channels to find a party—a party that she could attend. If you don't have a circle of friends who regularly have parties, you check out the party channels. They're always live and always showing a party that anyone can attend. Unfortunately, due to time and distance, potential partygoers often arrive after the party is over, but then there's usually enough of them there that another party will start up, and the cycle repeats itself. Eata scanned a few parties until she landed on one that looked like it was taking place in a swimming pool the size of a small city. There were people dancing and swimming and dance-swimming and a lot of odd-looking large fishes that were similar to what the man labelled "Fish Person" was trying to emulate. She sat and watched it for a while and then saw someone that she recognized. He seemed to be talking to someone and drinking and dancing all at the same time while half underwater and wearing sunglasses. And he had two heads. She clicked off the TV and got ready to go to a party. It had been a while and she could certainly use a drink or three.

# Chapter 23

“Drink?” asked Ford Prefect to the well-manicured banker-type and his vacant girlfriend on the other side of the bar where Ford stood. He hated this club. He hated the rich establishment people who patronized this club. He hated the false atmosphere of money-grubbers and wannabees. He would much rather be at a pub or some dingy basement bar, but this place had the money to buy exotic liquors and the clientele to pay for those exotic liquors which were made even more exotic by Ford’s innate mixing skills.

The man ordered something plain, the woman something dull. Ford mixed the drinks, threw in something interesting just to make them drunker faster, and set them on the bar for them to take and waltz off to be seen by important people. The man left a large tip. That was why Ford was here. He might be happier serving drinks in a seedy bar, but in this place he could really put together some crazy concoctions *and* get paid a stupid amount of money to do so. There was a plan in mind, and Ford had to stick to the plan because he knew where he was going. He’d seen the future and he knew just what to do.

Mostly. He had time, he could deviate off the plan a bit, and he’d been travelling on his days off—visiting Scotland, talking to the dolphins when he got the

chance, and hunting down his helper. He'd need someone on the ground to take care of a few bits of the plan so that history would work properly. Normally he didn't care a bit about meeting his former self or accidentally wiping out humanity with a well-timed sneeze, but there were a lot of little bits in the air on this one and if he messed it up, a lot of things wouldn't happen and most likely he would be vaporized by Vogons, and the whole point of this was to not end up like that.

Most of Ford's time was spent at this horrible nightclub or bumming around from dorm to dorm at a local college. He'd enrolled in a chemistry course so that he could have access to the labs to do a bit of work and access to the dorms to sleep. It'd been a little over two months and he'd managed to stay alive and healthy by sleeping on happy-go-lucky college kids' sofas and sneaking into the dining halls. Plus he could siphon off staggeringly large amounts of alcohol from his place of employment and that kept him in good spirits in more ways than one.

Another few weeks of this, though, and he'd be done. He'd be out of this club, off this planet, and he could go back to doing what he did best, which was... well, he wasn't exactly sure what it was, but it wasn't *this*.

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Arthur Dent sat in a pub—a nice dirty worn old pub that was his preferred pub because it was just next to his college campus and even if it wasn't the nicest pub

around, it was the closest, and that made it nice. He was there in this dreary November day with his college pals after a day of courses in marketing and business, none of which he was keenly interested in, but Arthur had the idea in his head that he might like to work at an ad agency and these were the courses that were recommended to him. So he took the courses that he didn't like very much and went to the pub that wasn't the best with his pals who were nice enough blokes but he couldn't see himself being best friends with any of them after college.

“Good day?” asked his pal on his left.

“Yeah, was it?” asked his pal on his right.

“Good enough, i suppose,” said Arthur. And that was about how Arthur's day was wrapping up. He took a drink from his glass and felt an odd sensation of wooziness, but it passed. “Cheers,” he said, raising his glass. This is normal, he thought to himself, for no reason that he could think of.

Except that it wasn't quite normal. There was some sort of commotion outside. Arthur craned his neck to get a look. Perhaps it was some of those war protestors again. In general, Arthur agreed that there shouldn't be war, but he wasn't quite of the mind-set to actively do anything about it. He settled back down and took a sip of his beer when the commotion made its way into the pub. Two rugby boys were prodding a strange man who was a bit manic and while he seemed to be trying to avoid a fight, he wasn't exactly shying away from it either.

“So you think you can take us, then, eh?” growled one bloke.

“Think you’re tough, eh?” said the other.

“In a fair fight, perhaps, but only because i’m much more highly evolved than you post-simian Earth-types. Now, if you’ll excuse me—”

“We *won’t* excuse you,” said brute number one, poking the older man in the chest.

“Now, don’t make me shoot you with my laser gun. I did tell you i was from another planet, didn’t i?”

The two blokes contemplated this for a few seconds. “Don’t get smart,” said brute number two.

“Oh, you barely know the meaning of the word. Look, i’m just here to collect an old friend, so if you’ll—”

Bloke number one decided that his words weren’t convincing enough and decided to augment his dialog with a fist, which he brought to bear with brute force (being a brute and all). The older man made an audible “oof” sound, stumbled backwards, righted himself, squared his shoulders, reached into his coat pocket, pulled out a slender shiny thing, and ended the conversation with two quick pops of light which left the two blokes with no suitable response other than surprised stares and an immediate crashing to the floor.

The bar went still. The man pocketed his pistol and shrugged at the shocked onlookers. “I *did* say i had a laser gun, didn’t i?” Nobody said anything, but out of the corner of his eye, Arthur saw the pub owner reaching for the phone. The man looked over at him. “Yes, good sir, call the police. They’re not dead, just stunned,



now let's see....” He looked around the bar, spotted the table where Arthur and his pals were sitting, and strode quickly over to them. “Right, Arthur, let's go.”

Arthur stared. He'd never seen this person before in his life. “Who, me?”

“Yes, you, Arthur Dent. I must say, you look quite good in your younger days. Now hurry up, we have a plane to catch.”

“m—me?”

The man looked like he was trying to convince a toddler to use long division. “Arthur! The police will be here soon and they will want to talk to you because you know me and you don't want to be arrested for aiding and abetting, do you?”

“I know you?”

“Well, you will. Now get up!”

“I don't even know your name.”

“Ford, Arthur. Ford Prefect.” There was some tittering in the crowd upon hearing the man's name and Ford rolled his eyes. “Yes, look, there was an unfortunate incident in translation. But the point is....” He pulled his laser pistol out again and pointed it at the boy on Arthur's left. “You, out of the way.” The boy quickly stood and backed up. “Arthur, up, move it, out the door, chop chop.” Arthur stood and Ford hustled him out of the pub. He looked up and down the street when they got outside, then pushed Arthur along away from the sounds of the approaching police sirens.

Two streets over, Ford hailed a cab, shoved Arthur into it, and climbed in. “Heathrow,” he said to the cab-

bie. The cab moved down the street while Ford sat back, completely at ease with the fact that he'd just kidnapped someone.

"Er, where are we going?" asked Arthur, trying to decide if he should make a run for it at the next stoplight.

"Portland," said Ford, eyeing Arthur suspiciously. "You're not going to try to escape, are you?"

"Ah, no, i suppose not," said Arthur, pulling his hand back from where it was reaching toward the car door. "And what's in Portland? Can't imagine the beaches will be too friendly this time of year." Arthur decided that keeping Ford talking was a better plan than sitting in silence. Perhaps he could pick up some information that might help him.

"Beaches?"

"Er, yes. The English Channel, you know."

Ford looked like something clicked. "There must be a Portland in England, am i right?"

"Yes, it's an island just off the coast at Weymouth."

"I see. We're not going there."

"Oh. But we are going to Portland?"

"Yes. The one in Oregon."

"Oregon? In the United States? I can't do that! I have classes tomorrow!"

"I think your classes will still be there even if you're not there to attend them."

"Well, yes, but i should be attending them. That's the whole point of college."

"Is it?"

Arthur was about to argue on the side of “yes,” but then he pondered it for a moment and got to wondering if simply going to class *was* the only point of college. It seemed as though there was a lot more to it than that, but he couldn’t come up with what.

The rest of the cab ride passed in silence. They arrived at Heathrow, Ford paid the cabbie, and he hustled Arthur to the ticketing agents, where he bought two one-way tickets to Portland, U.S.A. via Chicago, Illinois and Seattle, Washington. They hurried through the terminal to a bank of rental lockers where Ford retrieved a heavy square briefcase, then on to the gate. Arthur kept an eye on Ford and was deciding when he might be able to escape when Ford sidled up next to him and jabbed the point of his laser gun into Arthur’s ribs.

“Look, Arthur, i know this may seem strange to you, but i need a man on the ground for this operation, and you’re the only one i trust. I’m not going to hurt you... probably... and i’m not after ransom money or anything. Just be a frood and get on the plane. You’ll be back to your miserable life before you know it.”

“Who says my life is miserable?”

“Oh, you do. Often. You couldn’t get it out of your head for a while. Drove me a bit blerky.”

“When did i ever say that? And how could i have said it to you if i just met you?”

Ford sighed. “You *will* meet me, Arthur, and you *will* say that your life is miserable, but it *will* get better and you’ll have a hoopy time and you just have to let

me steer the timeline right now because the universe is turning slightly and we need to hang on, got it?”

“Er, no.”

“Good. Get on the plane.” The attendant had announced that their flight was boarding and Ford casually nudged Arthur toward the gate with the tip of his gun. As he sat down and fastened his seat belt, Arthur thought that maybe he could convince one of the stewardesses that he was being kidnapped and get off the plane. He was still trying to come up with a good escape plan when the jumbo jet lifted off the runway and pointed toward North America.

# Chapter 24

Eata pointed her spaceship down to the landing pads of Setasea 4. She was routed in, set down, and welcomed with a wreath of flowers, then told where to go for the party. As she discovered, this was a week-long party in the capital city of Setasea 4, so she didn't miss it. There were creatures from all over the galaxy here—mostly humanoid, but a lot of other shapes as well. The hosts, and residents of the planet, seemed to be large fish-like creatures with happy eyes who always looked like they were smiling. They were attentive and generous and made sure that everyone was having a good time. “What a happy place,” Eata thought to herself. “I really must get out more.”

A Setasean popped its head out of the body of water that she was walking next to. “Arrrr, welcome to the grand escape anniversary party! Be there anything i might help you with?”

“Oh, actually, i was hoping to find someone, but this party is so huge, i doubt you'd know him.”

“Try me, lassie!”

“Um, well, i guess his most distinguishing feature is that he's got two heads and three arms, but otherwise, pretty basic humanoid.”

“Ye wouldn't by chance be speaking of Zaphod Beeblebrox, would ye?”

“Oh! Why, yes! You know him?”

“Aye, there’s nary a soul who hasn’t turned a flipper for old Zaphod. Hop in a dinghy and i’ll give youse a tow, matey!”

“Why thank you!” Eata stepped into one of the many small boats lining the walkway and the Setasean grabbed a short rope in its mouth and set off across the water, pulling Eata along. It was a thrilling ride, skimming across the crystalline waters, weaving in and out among party guests, and it wasn’t long before she was pulled up alongside a floating island where dozens of people were lounging in reclining chairs and sipping fruity drinks. She spotted Zaphod among them, one head—the less attached one—conversing with a few people, the other asleep. “Thank you again!” said Eata to the Setasean.

“Arrr, not a problem. Enjoy the party and may the tides be always in your favor!” It flipped its tail and dove below the surface. Eata turned and approached Zaphod. Before she could get to him, a willowy stick-like creature stepped in front of her.

“May i provide you with a drink?” it asked in a woody, wispy tone.

“Oh. Yes, please. Something fruity and fizzy would be nice!”

One of the creature’s arms shot out to a nearby bar, quickly mixed a drink, dropped what looked like a candied shark’s tooth into it, and whipped it back to Eata. “Your drink. Please enjoy.” It wafted away to the next guest and Eata resumed her trek toward Zaphod. She

was interrupted again, this time by a humanoid woman who stepped in front of her.

“Trillian Astra, Tock Top News,” she said. “Who are you and why are you here?” She stared at Eata intently, with the seasoned demeanor of a serious reporter.

“I’m Eatapip Torkskillet.”

“Never heard of you.”

“Very few people have, and i rather like it that way. I came here to talk to Mr. Beeblebrox.”

Trillian glanced over her shoulder at Zaphod, who appeared to be telling a very long and involved joke. She turned back to Eata. “He’s half asleep.”

“Well, i think i should only need to talk with the awake half.”

Trillian gave Eata a quick appraisal. “Yeah? About what?”

“Let’s just say that he once had in his possession an item of mine and i’m curious as to where that item may have ended up. It has some sentimental value.”

“This item... bigger than a floombian trangkiln?”

“Oh yes, quite a bit.”

Trillian pondered this for a moment. “Was it a house?” Eata shook her head. “Some sort of hibernation chamber?” Another shake. Trillian tapped her nose a few times. “Spaceship?”

“Well, yes.”

“He’s had a lot of spaceships, very few of which he’s owned. In fact, now that i think about it, i’m not sure he’s ever owned one.”

“This was a stolen one.”

“Well, there were quite a few of those. I doubt he’d remember it.”

“This one was quite special.”

“Still, *looooots* of spaceships.” She stood in Eata’s way like a bodyguard, implying that Zaphod was not to be bothered.

Eata, in turn, sized up Trillian. She took a sip of the fizzy drink then leaned in closer. “Does the name Heart of Gold ring any bells?”

Trillian’s eyes bugged out. She cocked her head, listening to Zaphod’s story, then grabbed Eata by the arm and hustled her over to Zaphod. Upon arriving, she told the punchline of the joke, allowed for a second or two of laughter, then shooed everyone else away.

“Is the joke over?” asked Zaphod, in a bit of a haze.

“Yes. You were brilliant.” She slapped Zaphod’s other head lightly a few times. “Wake up!”

Zaphod’s napping head popped up. “Is this where the party is?” it asked, looking around.

“You’re *at* the party, dumbhead!” said Zaphod’s other head.

“Hoopy!” said the first head. “I should have a drink.” He glanced around, then looked longingly at the drink in Eata’s hand. She smiled and handed it to him. “Double hoopy!” he said, taking a gulp. “And fizzy!” He took another gulp than eyed Eata. “What was your name again?”

“Eata Torkskillet. We met once, very briefly. I shook your hand at a ceremony just before you stole something that i had a hand in creating.” Both of



Zaphod's heads started mumbling a lot of things about burden of proof and statutes of limitation and international waters before Eata cut him off. "You didn't steal it from *me*, so i don't really care about that. I just want to know where it is. The Heart of Gold. Wonderful spaceship. Thought it would be nice to see it again."

Zaphod sat up at the mention of the Heart of Gold and the blue glowing hoverbot above his heads bounced a little further away. He looked around furtively. "Do you know where the Heart of Gold is right now?"

"No. I was hoping you did."

Zaphod phlumped back down into his lounge chair, the hoverbot sinking lower with him. "Not a clue," he said. "I liked that ship."

"Yeah, it was pretty great." She watched the hoverbot for a moment and her engineer brain kicked in. "Is there some purpose to that or is it just a fashion accessory?"

"Old janx-for-brains here decided it would be fun to be in a game of tag," said Trillian. "It seems to be tied to Zaphod's essence or something. We can't get rid of it."

"Can't even shoot it," said Zaphod. To prove that point, he pulled out his Kill-O-Zap and shot the hoverbot a few times. All the blasts went straight through it and off into the sky where they just missed a passing bird-like sentient being who was visiting Setasea for the first time with thoughts of moving there. The close call with the laser blasts, however, convinced her to move to a different planet and that decision set off a chain of wacky adventures for her and her friends that

were eventually chronicled in a series of highly popular books.

“Every time i try to get near it,” added Trillian, “it goes out of phase and i can’t touch it.” She threw an empty glass at it and it sailed through the bot in a graceful arc right to one of the spindly arms of the bartender, who caught it and proceeded to begin washing it.

“Well, there must be some way to disable it. What’s its purpose?”

“Apparently,” said Trillian, “to alert everyone in the game where the person who is It”—she gestured at Zaphod—“is. Then they come after him and try to remove his bones.”

“His bones?”

“Dumb game.”

“So the game is over when all of Zaphod’s bones are removed?”

Trillian studied the bot. “I guess so. Hey Zaphod, how attached are you to your bones?”

“They keep me vertical, i think. Probably do some other things, too. Why?”

“We need to remove them.”

Zaphod shrugged. “Okay.”

“Actually,” said Eata, thinking the problem through. “It may be that we can temporarily, and very briefly, extricate all of Zaphod’s bones, just for a split second, but that might be enough time for that hoverbot to register that the game is over.”

“Then it’ll go away?” asked Zaphod.

“Probably.”

“Probably?” echoed Trillian.

“Well, it’s highly probable that the hoverbot will recognize the end of the game if all of Zaphod’s bones are gone. But it’s very improbable that his bones can be made to be gone and then not gone. Very very improbable.”

“So it can’t be done?”

“Of course it can. We just have to calculate exactly how improbable it is. Then, if we had some sort of infinite improbability drive....”

“The Heart of Gold!” grinned Trillian. “Get up Beeblebrox! We have a ship to find!”

“Does it have a bar?”

# Chapter 25

“Have a drink, Arthur,” said Ford.

Arthur glared at him. Arthur had already consumed far too many drinks and he was woozy and tired and hungry. The flight to Chicago took all night. Then they had to wait in Chicago for a few hours, during which time Arthur thought about escaping again but Ford never seemed to quite fall asleep and every time Arthur sidled away, Ford was right there with the tip of a laser gun in his side. Now they were approaching Seattle and still had to fly down to Portland and Arthur was grumpy. “I’ve had too many drinks already. I should be in class right now. You still haven’t explained what we’re doing here.”

Ford rolled his head down and opened his eyes. “Okay, Arthur, here’s the truth. You and i will meet in the future. I’m not sure exactly when, but we’ll meet and go to parties and have drinks at the local pub. You’ll have a job in advertising and own a nice home in the west country, until one day when it’s due to be torn down but that also happens to be the day that the Earth is blown up.” He leaned in, conspiratorially. “Did i mention that i was born on a small planet near Betelgeuse? Maybe i should have started with that. Anyway, we, Arthur, we escape! We got off this rock and hook up with my old pal Zaphod and boy, do we have some fun!

Arthur looked skeptical. “We do?”

“Oh yes! Loads of it! I can’t remember what we do, exactly... i think there’s a bird involved somehow... Anyway, you, Arthur, you meet the love of your life! And it all happens because the Vogons destroy the Earth!”

“What’s a Vagon?”

“Oooh, nasty creatures. Avoid ’em if you can, although, you won’t be able to, but back to this time-line. What we’re doing here is getting *me* off this planet so that i don’t corrupt anything and you meet me in the future and the Earth gets blown up and everyone’s happy, okay?”

“How is everyone happy if the Earth gets blown up?”

“Good point. Try not to think about it. I’ll fill you in on the details when we get to Portland, but it’s a very easy job Arthur, and this whole operation depends on you!”

“What do i have to do?”

“You need to deliver a package for me.”

“That’s it?”

“To a sandbar on a riverbank. Trust me, it’ll all make sense when it’s done.”

“That seems unlikely.”

“You’re right. Have a drink.” Ford leaned back in his seat again and closed his eyes. Arthur’s mood had changed from grumpy to annoyed.

# Chapter 26

Arthur Dent, the Arthur Dent standing in front of a rickety house near a big black obelisk, the Arthur Dent who was living in a zoo on Golgafrincham, the Arthur Dent who used to live on Earth but now doesn't because Earth doesn't exist, was annoyed. His annoyance was partly due to the fact that everyone around him was also annoyed, or grumpy, or angry, or bothered, but it was mostly because no one seemed to agree with him that they were living in a fabulously calm and satisfying place. What annoyed him further was that he was beginning to see that they were right. Fenchurch had been a little snippy with him lately, Random was even more furious at everything all day, Spутty was endlessly complaining, Libby was starting to punch things, and Dan... the new guy, Dan, he was simply not accepting that he wasn't on Earth anymore and he kept trying to get anyone who'd listen to him to admit that it was some big crazy scheme to fool him. Everyone else had stopped listening but Arthur felt that he should be polite and hear him out. It was making him annoyed.

"All i'm saying," said Dan, "is that you can't prove to me that this is not some grand simulation that you've got me under."

"How can i prove to you that something isn't? That's not the way proof works."

“Well, prove to me that it is!”

“Look around you! Is this Earth? There are three moons! There’s a big black obelisk that makes food magically appear! All of the stars in the sky are wrong! And if you walk out of town, you come back into town from the other side! How would that be possible on Earth?”

“Like i said, it’s all a computer simulation. Just like the moon landing.”

“Are you seriously saying that you think the moon landing was faked?”

“Prove to me it wasn’t!”

“Of course it wasn’t! They went there! They took pictures! If the moon were still there, i could show you.... Actually, now that i think about it, i wonder if the moon *is* still there? I know the Vogons blew up the Earth....”

“Well, you wouldn’t know anything about it. You’re an Englishman.”

“What’s that got to do with it?”

“The moon shots were all in America!”

“I thought you said we didn’t go to the moon.”

“Yeah, we went to a soundstage in the Nevada desert. In *America!*”

Arthur held his head for a moment. If there were ever a good time for a Vogon with an itchy trigger finger to show up, now would be it. He looked around hopefully, thinking that maybe the Keepers could read his mind and would send some along. When none came, he sighed. “I’m going to have some lunch. You’re

welcome to join me if you'd like." Actually, he rather hoped that Dan would *not* join him, but being the polite Englishman that he was, he felt obligated to extend the courtesy.

"It's the food, right?" said Dan. "That's how you're doing it. You've drugged the food. That's it, isn't it?"

Arthur sighed again. "Dan, have you ever heard of Occam's razor?"

"The idea that the simplest solution is usually the right one? Yeah. I'm an engineer."

"Great. You are, by all of your senses, alive and well in a place that does not match any place on Earth. Logically, you're not on Earth."

"No. No, no, no. It's the computers. The simplest solution is that i'm in a computer simulation of a place that's not Earth. It's the only rational explanation."

"What year are you from again?"

"From? It's 1971. There's no such thing as time-travel. That's science fiction."

"Okay, let's say it's 1971. It isn't, but let's pretend that it is. Has humankind mapped the entire human brain?"

"No."

"Have they built a computer powerful enough to fool anyone into thinking that they're talking to a human and not a computer?"

Dan paused, thought for a second or two. "Not that i know of, but that doesn't mean that they haven't!"

"In all your dealings with computers, being an engineer and all, has a computer ever been able to do



anything besides menial tasks that are programmed into it?”

“Look, i don’t know where you’re going with this, but this”—he gestured around him—“isn’t real.”

“I see. So either there’s a computer in 1971 that is so all powerful that it can build entire worlds in a human brain, using countless amounts of time and energy, which seems very unlikely, or there’s a computer somewhere in the future that actually *can* do that and that’s where you are, *or*, you’re actually not in a computer simulation. Occam’s razor says the third one.” He turned and walked into the house, leaving Dan to sputter about maybe alien technology used by the government at Area 51.

# Chapter 27

Trillian, Zaphod, and Eata were sitting in a café in Setasea 4 which was quite unfortunately named Urea 51. They were discussing the best way to find the Heart of Gold.

“Where’s the last place you saw it?” asked Eata.

“Don’t remember,” said Zaphod.

“A lot of things have happened,” said Trillian.  
“Like, a *lot*.”

“There were some men with cricket bats,” said Zaphod, trying to dredge up memories that were stubbornly refusing to be dredged up.

Eata pried at those memories for a bit without getting anywhere. They all sat and thought for a while. “If we could find someone who could survive being in the Total Perspective Vortex, they could see everything and tell us where it is, but I doubt that any creature like that exists, and there’s so much information in the Vortex, pulling out one little bit of it might be impossible.”

“I’ve been there.” said Trillian.

“You have?” said Eata with surprise.

“I’ve been in it!” bragged Zaphod.

“You what?” said Eata with even more surprise.

“Yeah, hoopy place, saw the entirety of existence in one go! Pretty amazing!”

“How did you survive?”

Zaphod shrugged. "I never thought about it."

"Weren't you in some alternate reality at the time?" asked Trillian.

Zaphod shrugged again. "Mighta been. I've been to a lot of realities."

"Do you think you could survive going into it again?" asked Eata.

"Why not? What's the worst that could happen?"

"You could turn into a brain-dead vegetable."

"What's the best that could happen?"

"Well," thought Eata, "since it's almost always the worst that could happen with the Total Perspective Vortex, i don't have an answer to that question."

"Maybe Marvin would know. He's the attendant there now."

Eata's jaw dropped. "Marvin? Marvin the robot?" Trillian nodded. "He's there? Well, that solves our problem! He's the ship's computer for the Heart of Gold! He'll know where it is!"

"I thought the ships's computer was named Eddie."

"Oh, yeah. Well, they're two parts of the same whole. I'll explain it on the way."

The three of them paid their bill, thanked their dolphin hosts, and set off in Eata's TR4 to the not-at-all lovely and vacation unfriendly Frogstar World B.

# Chapter 28

Ford and Arthur were driving up US Highway 30 along the Columbia River in a mid-sized rental car which, to Arthur, seemed like an enormous land boat. Ford piloted the craft haphazardly, peering out the side window, looking for a certain spot. After a harrowing drive of near-misses, both off the side of the road and into oncoming traffic, Ford pulled off in a small parking area and led Arthur down to the river. He wandered around for a bit, then brought Arthur to a spot along the Columbia.

“Here,” he said, pointing at the sand and gravel at their feet. “I’m going to give you something, and you have to bury it here.”

Arthur looked around. “Why?”

“Because it was found here, Arthur! How can it be found here if it was never put here? All you have to do is rent a car from Seattle, drive here, bury the things—”

“From Seattle?” interrupted Arthur. “Why are we going back to Seattle?”

“Because that’s the way time goes, Arthur! Pay attention! Now, I’ve done a lot of calculations, which I don’t like doing. I’ve estimated how long it will take you to get here from a hotel near the airport—you’ll have to stay at a hotel overnight so you can get here in the daytime—and you have to get here before about one

o'clock in the afternoon, which means you have to leave Seattle by... let's say 9:30 at the latest to give yourself time, got it?"

"How am i supposed to find this exact spot again?" said Arthur, unhappy and confused and not really paying attention to Ford.

Ford took out his slender, stylish laser pistol and resisted the urge to shoot Arthur. Instead, he blasted a few holes in the ground, then put some scorch marks on the nearby trees for good measure. "Find the blaster marks. Think you can do that?" Arthur, startled by the sudden cacophony of laser zapping, nodded meekly. "Good, let's go."

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Ford checked them into a cheap hotel near the Portland airport. He informed Arthur that he was going to sleep and that if Arthur tried to escape he would absolutely find him again and this time he wouldn't be so nice. Arthur didn't really see how kidnapping could be considered "nice," but he accepted his fate and slept fitfully. The next morning, they ate breakfast in a cheap diner, then drove to the airport. Ford walked all around it, surreptitiously checking doors and hallways, then he led Arthur back out to the rental car.

"Aren't we flying somewhere?" asked Arthur as they drove out of the airport.

"This afternoon," said Ford. "Got some time." Ford drove around Portland making odd comments about

the architecture of the city, which Arthur found to be alternately charming and ugly. He wondered if all American cities looked like this.

After a stop for lunch, a stop at a bank where Ford exchanged a suspiciously large amount of currency, and too many hours of driving in a swaying boat of a car and getting a tad nauseous, Ford drove back to the airport. He turned in the rental car, handed Arthur some money, told him to go buy a ticket for Northwest Orient Airlines flight 305 to Seattle, and said that he'd meet him at the gate. Arthur walked away from Ford and seriously considered running away, but his route back home had him going back through Seattle anyway, so he might as well get on this flight, for whatever reason this odd person was demanding it of him. He bought his ticket and went to the gate, where he sat, waiting for Ford.

It wasn't long before Ford ambled in with his heavy briefcase, wearing sunglasses, trying to look cool and casual, which for the most part, he did. He glanced around the people waiting at the gate and settled his eyes on a man sitting apart from everyone else with a similar look—dark clothes, sunglasses, square briefcase. He walked up to this man and leaned over him. “Dan Cooper?”

The man looked startled and suspicious. “Yes?”

“I need you to come with me.” He pulled aside his jacket to reveal the shiny laser pistol hidden beneath it.

Dan eyed the gun skeptically. “That’s a toy gun.”

“Listen, it really isn't, but we don't have time for

that. I have a simple proposition for you, but we need to discuss this elsewhere.”

“Who are you?”

“The guy that’s saving your life.”

“I wasn’t aware my life needed saving.”

“Oh no?” Ford pulled an enormous wad of cash out of a pocket and waved it briefly before pocketing it again. “Let’s go, get up.”

Dan sat stubbornly and hugged his briefcase to his chest. “I have a bomb,” he whispered.

“Yeah, big deal. Mine’s bigger.” He swung his briefcase up and opened it just a crack so that Dan could see the contents, then closed it and glanced around the gate area. “This will all make sense if you just go with me to the bathroom.”

Dan seemed reluctant but after some more cajoling and low-level threats, he got up and went with Ford towards the bathroom. Ford looked over at Arthur, who had been watching this interaction. He gave Arthur a meaningful nod, meaning, he hoped, “follow us.” Arthur rolled his eyes and followed along.

Once in the bathroom, Ford became much more animated. He quickly checked all of the stalls and once he determined that they were all empty, he turned to Arthur. “Hold the door shut, Arthur. Don’t let anyone in.”

“What are you planning to do?” asked Dan, visibly sweating, as Arthur manned the door.

“Okay, Dan Cooper. I don’t know what your real name is, but it’s not Dan Cooper, i know that. You’re

planning on hijacking this flight to Seattle with that bomb in your briefcase. You're going to ask for two hundred thousand dollars and some parachutes, and you're going to jump off the tail stairs somewhere over... uh, up that way somewhere." He gestured vaguely as the color drained from Dan's face. "But here's the deal. I'm going to help you." He unloaded the bundles of cash that he had on him and placed them on the bathroom counter. "Two hundred thousand. Take it. Walk out of the airport. Give me your ticket and i'll be you. You're free. I'm taking your place."

There was a moment of stunned silence as Dan took in this information. "How... how did you..."

"How did i know? I've seen the future! Actually, i was in the future, but i took way way way too much of a crazy fungus and it hopscotched me all over time and i got stuck here, but i know how i get out of here because i know there's a worm-hole in the atmosphere and you jumped into it and i need to be the one to jump into it because i need to get home. Kind of like Alice in Wonderland—no... the one with the flying monkeys and a tornado...."

Dan looked at Ford in disbelief, then over at Arthur, "Is this guy for real?"

Arthur shrugged. "He says he's from Betelgeuse and the Earth's going to get blown up, so..."

"Think it through, Dan," said Ford, bouncing up and down a little. "No stress, no mess, just take the money and go do whatever you want with it."

Dan looked at Ford, then the money, then Arthur,



then back at the money. Finally, he slapped his ticket down on the counter and started stuffing all of the cash into his jacket pockets. When he was done, he stood still for a moment, not knowing what to do. “Do you want my bomb?” he asked Ford.

“Nope. Got one.”

“Oh. Well, thank you.”

Arthur unblocked the door and Dan Cooper hurried out. Ford poked his head out of the bathroom to make sure Dan was leaving the airport, then popped back in. “Right. From here on out, we don’t know each other. Don’t talk to me, don’t look at me, probably shouldn’t even think about me. Just get on the plane. I’ll give you your final instructions when we land in Seattle. Pleasure working with you, Arthur!” He dashed out the door, leaving Arthur, once again, slightly befuddled.

# Chapter 29

Eata guided the teal-blue TR4 down toward the surface of Frogstar World B. The catalog listed this color as “mint green” but it was more of a sea foam blue. For that reason, Eata had named it “Marina.” She liked to name her spaceships and felt that it gave them personality, even if their onboard computers didn’t have any. This being a stock TR4, its computer wasn’t installed with Personality Plus Programing and merely did its work with uncomplaining efficiency. She swooped low over the Total Perspective Vortex, enjoying the way the ship handled in atmosphere, then spun it around and settled down near the half dome in the rocky landscape.

Zaphod bounded out, the hoverbot above him phasing itself through the hull of the ship as he ducked out the door. “Me first!” he called out, running over to the single-occupant elevator into the Vortex.

“Is he always like this?” asked Eata to Trillian.

“No, he’s usually worse.”

Marvin was slouched in the corner of the room housing the Total Perspective Vortex. Actually, being a round room, there weren’t any corners, but Marvin had spent a lot of time meticulously measuring the slight angles of every straight piece of wall that made up the circular room and had determined that the place where he sat had the highest angle between two

surfaces of any of the angles in the entire room, therefore he designated it as a corner.

The elevator dinged, the door slid open, and Zaphod Beeblebrox stepped into the room. Marvin looked up. “Oh, you’re back. I thought you’d left me here.”

“Did i?” asked Zaphod obliviously. He walked over to the box where the entirety of existence was housed and began examining it.

“Are you here to get me or have you been sentenced to death?”

Before Zaphod could answer, the elevator dinged again and Trillian came in. “Hello, Marvin,” she said.

Marvin looked from one to the other. “I’m going to assume that neither of you have been sentenced to death. How miserable. I’m now calculating the odds that you’re here to get me.”

“Er, we weren’t planning on it,” said Trillian. “Is there somewhere you need to go?”

“Oh, don’t mind me, i’ll just sit here in this corner and rust away, if that’s all right with everybody.”

The elevator dinged again. Eata stepped out, looked at Marvin, and smiled. Marvin did not expect this. Nobody ever smiled at him unless they were about to make him do something horrible. But this was a genuine smile and it threw Marvin’s circuits all out of whack for a couple of milliseconds.

“Hi Marvin!” said Eata. “It’s good to see you!”

Marvin, of course, instantly recognized Eata because he never forgot anything or anyone. “Is it? I wonder what the probability of that being true is...”

“The probability is one hundred percent, Marvin,” said Eata in a slightly scolding voice. “I haven’t seen you in a very long time and i’ve always wondered how you and Eddie and the ship were doing.”

“Oh yes, the ship. Nasty thing.”

“The Heart of Gold, Marvin,” said Trillian. “Do you know where it is?”

“You’re the ones who last had it. Well, you two anyway.” He pointed at Zaphod and Trillian. “You haven’t had it in a while.” He pointed at Eata.

“Marvin,” said Eata, “you’re half of the ship’s computer. You must have some sort of link with Eddie, right?”

“Eddie’s not very nice to me.”

“Well, *you’re* not very nice to you,” said Zaphod, “so how could he treat you any differently than you treat yourself if you’re both the same thing?”

“He could tell me where he’s going,” said Marvin dejectedly.

“So you haven’t heard from him at all?” asked Eata.

“Not since they”—he nodded at Zaphod and Trillian again—“left me here to get some lunch... or perhaps dinner. I suspect that the Heart of Gold is not in the galaxy at this time.”

“Not in the galaxy?” asked Trillian. “What galaxy is it in?”

“I think the key phrase here is ‘time,’” said Eata. “At this time right now, the Heart of Gold isn’t. In a past time it was, and most likely in a future time it is as well, but right now, it isn’t.”

“Well, how do we get it to this time?” asked Zaphod.

“You could go to its time and steal it,” suggested Marvin. “You do seem to like stealing things.”

“I do, yes. That i do.”

“Then i suggest you do that.” Marvin tried to sink lower to the floor in the hope that everyone would leave him alone now. It didn’t work.

“Listen, Marvin you old frood... time travel ain’t cheap. None of us has a spare time machine lying around. Can’t you give us more information than that?”

“If you crave information, you could step in the Total Perspective Vortex. That has *all* the information. I could turn it on for you.” Marvin’s circuits warmed in the fleeting hope that he could get rid of one of these people forever. And since it was the one with two heads, it was nearly half of all the humans in this room who were currently bothering him.

“Yeah, that sounds like a lark!” said Zaphod. He strode over to the box in the middle of the room and opened the door.

“Uh, Zaphod, i really don’t recommend that,” said Trillian.

“Yes,” agreed Eata. “I don’t know what the improbability of you surviving the last time you were in it was, but the improbability of surviving it twice is astronomical!”

“Well, what if you go in?” said Zaphod to Eata. “You built it, right?”

“That’s flawed logic. Would you ask the inventor of a death ray to stand in front of it to test it?”

“Probably.”

“I’m not going in there. I know what it does.”

“What about him?” asked Trillian, jerking her thumb at Marvin.

“Yeah, what about him?” said Zaphod.

“Iiiiiiiiiinteresting!” chimed in Zaphod Prime.

“Marvin,” said Eata, using her best serious engineer’s voice, “what would happen if you went in the Total Perspective Vortex and we turned it on? Could your circuits handle the everything of everything?”

Marvin sat silently as billions of calculations churned through his enormous brain. Usually when Marvin was answering an idiotic question (as almost all questions from these primitive humanoids were) he would wait just long enough to annoy the person asking the question, and then answer. In this instance, though, the pause was unintentional and the humanoids around him actually hit their breaking point before Marvin could subtly irritate them by answering just before that.

“Marvin?” prompted Trillian. “Do you have an answer?”

Marvin looked up at the three-plus of them. “I’m sorry, it seems that that calculation has hit an infinite recursion loop. How odd. I don’t like not knowing something.”

“Infinite excusor what?” said Zaphod.

“Ah!” said Eata, beaming with interest. “Of course! Marvin is the result of a brain-within-a-brain. Well, Marvin and Eddie are, actually. I had to use an internal recursion in order to accommodate for the massive calculation power required to accurately fly the infi-

nite improbability drive. Fascinating!”

There was a brief moment of time—maybe a few milliseconds—when Marvin was actually interested in this conversation and the complex implications of it. It was enough to almost make him smile—that is, if a robot could smile, which Marvin, being a robot, couldn’t. “I suppose you’re right,” said Marvin. He had nothing else to say about it, but it was consuming a lot of his circuits at the moment.

“So, do we throw him in there and see what happens?” asked Trillian.

“I vote for that!” said Zaphod I. “Second!” said Zaphod II. He stepped over to Marvin and attempted to lift him off of the floor, with only marginal success.

“Wait!” said Eata. “I think we can get our answer if we can calculate the exact improbability of the Heart of Gold’s when and where.”

“That’s it?” asked Trillian. “Just find a number?”

“It’s surprising what can be accomplished using math. I’ll just need some time to run the variables through Marvin.” She started asking Marvin to do calculations, which he reluctantly did, each time taking longer and longer to answer, just to annoy everyone.

At one particularly long pause, Zaphod glared at him. “Is he looping again?” At which point, Marvin spit out the answer and Zaphod declared that this was far too boring and he was going back up to the ship to eat some lunch. Trillian followed him out and Eata sat with Marvin, running numbers.

# Chapter 30

Northwest Orient Airlines flight 305 to Seattle was proceeding along normally until it wasn't. Something seemed amiss as the plane circled Seattle for a long time without landing. Passengers were mumbling and whispering about what might be wrong, but Arthur knew. Somewhere in the back of the plane, Ford Prefect had informed a stewardess that he had a bomb and that this was a hijacking. Arthur had never been part of a hijacking before and was disappointed to find out how utterly boring it was. The airline crew were doing their best to keep everyone calm, but Arthur could see the fear in their eyes. He wanted to tell them that it would all be fine because the hijacker was from the future *and* from a little planet near Betelgeuse, but he calculated the odds that that would make him sound like a crazy person as very high. He sat back and watched the sun set over the Pacific as they circled.

The jet landed and stopped at the end of the runway. Cars and trucks approached, and some bags were thrown onboard. Ford strolled down the aisle and dropped a note in Arthur's lap. It said "you're the last one off the plane." Then the pilot announced that all of the passengers would be unloaded as the hijacker's demands had been met. A stair-truck rolled up to the jet and soon the flight crew was calmly evacuating the



plane. Arthur politely let everyone else ahead of him, then started down the aisle toward the front of the plane. Ford came up behind him and spun him around, making sure that the flight crew wasn't paying attention to them.

"Here, Arthur." He handed Arthur two large wads of US bills. He peeled a few off of one wad and stuffed them into Arthur's pocket. "That's for the hotel and rental car and... oh yeah, flight home! Bury these two bundles where i told you." Arthur put the wads in his jacket pocket. "And one more thing. Eat this, now." Ford held out a blobby green pill in front of Arthur's face.

Arthur looked at it skeptically. "What is it?"

"It's a time-delayed something-or-other that you have to eat now or we'll both die when the Earth explodes. Well, you'll die for certain, anyway. Just eat it!"

"Why should i trust you?"

"Because the love of your life will be worth the wait. Is that good enough? Eat!" Ford looked nervously up at the front of the jet. The last few passengers other than Arthur were just about to exit.

Arthur sighed and put the pill in his mouth.

"Don't chew! Just swallow!" hissed Ford, massaging Arthur's throat as though he was forcing medicine into a dog. Arthur gagged a bit, but swallowed the pill. "Hoopy! Now get off the plane, have a nice dinner, and remember, you *have* to bury those bills! See you!" He spun Arthur back around and pushed him toward the front.

Arthur was the last passenger off the plane. He turned to see the flight crew leaving as well, then the stairs backed away and the door of the jet closed up. That, Arthur hoped, would be the last time he'd ever see that crazy man.

Inside the plane, Ford talked with the pilots, then gave them explicit instructions on how and where to fly. The jet was cleared for takeoff and headed south, towards Nevada. Ford climbed into a parachute, used some of the cords from another parachute and tied his briefcase and the backpack full of money securely to him, then went to the back of the plane and opened up the rear stairs. At approximately 8:13 PM Pacific Time on Wednesday, November 24, 1971, on the planet Earth, Sol-3, in sector ZZ9-Plural-Z-Alpha in the unfashionable western spiral arm of the Milky Way galaxy, Ford Prefect jumped off of the tail stairs of a Boeing 727 over the storm-filled skies of southwest Washington state and right into, as he knew, as he'd planned, a worm-hole.

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Arthur rented a car at the Seattle airport, drove to a hotel, had a pleasant dinner, slept well (mostly due to the absence of Ford), got up and had a fine breakfast, and drove south. He'd asked at the rental agency for the smallest car that they offered and was given a Plymouth Valiant, which he thought was an overly optimistic name for a rather pedestrian car. It swayed and

bounced down the road as American cars did and it made Arthur long for the green hills of England. He'd never been in the United States before and thought that he might as well take this chance to see a little bit of it before he had to fly home and catch up on all of the classes he'd missed. Besides, he did assure Ford that he'd do this errand, and it certainly wouldn't look good if he came through UK customs with thousands of dollars in cash on him.

He missed the spot on the river where Ford had taken him the day before, but found it after he'd turned around and headed north again. The trees with the laser blasts on them were a sure sign. He found one of the holes in the ground that Ford had blasted, tossed the two wads of bills into them, then used his foot to bury them with sand and rocks.

"There!" he said to himself. "It seems pointless, but i've done it. This has certainly been the strangest adventure of my life." It wasn't, of course. There were many many far stranger things that were going to happen to Arthur Dent, but at the time, this seemed to be right up there at the top of the list.

Arthur walked along the river for a while, admiring the rugged beauty of the Pacific northwest. He returned to the Valiant and continued south. Maybe he'd spend a day or two travelling around before purchasing a ticket home. He was starting to like this idea when he started to feel a bit queasy. The road in front of him wavered and wobbled and he felt like he was on a water bed. Strange images flashed in front of him—a

spaceship, a talking dog, a man with two heads, a dirty man with a copy machine, Elvis Presley, a beautiful woman. In among these were scenes that he recognized from growing up—his parents, grade school, a football match, his college dorm room. Everything was blurring and whooshing and Arthur felt like the Valiant was massaging him into a fitful sleep while a movie projector played inside his head.

The wooziness passed. “Cheers,” he said, raising his glass. This is normal, he thought to himself, for no reason that he could think of. It was normal for him to be sitting in a pub with a couple of pals after a day of classes.

Except that it wasn’t quite normal. There was some sort of commotion outside. Arthur craned his neck to get a look. Perhaps it was some of those war protestors again. But no, it was just a man looking in the window of the pub. It seemed that he looked straight at Arthur, gave him a thumbs-up, then disappeared from view. Arthur had no idea who the man was but he seemed vaguely familiar.

# Chapter 31

Arthur and Fenchurch were sitting on a large flat rock at the edge of a field looking up at a canopy of stars. A sprinkling of rain had passed through earlier, but the clouds were slowly clearing and the couple could see the pinpoints of light above them, intermittently obscured but still visible.

“Do you think the Golgafrinchams had constellations?” asked Fenchurch.

“Oh, i would imagine,” answered Arthur. He scanned the specks above them for a moment. “Look there, you could reasonably make the shape of a teapot with those brighter ones.”

“And that would be the ancient god of tea?” Fenchurch giggled and Arthur gave her a squeeze.

“I suppose it could have been a soup kettle, or a kettle for milk, or some such—” He stopped and sat up straighter. Fenchurch had heard it too—a floopy sound, like someone shaking out a bedsheet. “Random?” called out Arthur.

“I think it came from up there,” said Fenchurch, looking skyward.

“Up there? How could—” he stopped again, then pointed. Drifting down below the clouds was a man in parachute. Fenchurch and Arthur watched as the man descended then tumbled to the ground in the next field

over. They both got up and made their way quickly through the semi-darkness. Two of Golgafrincham's three moons were up that night, but as they were fairly small moons, they didn't provide much light. Arthur stumbled as they crossed the rock wall between the fields and swore, causing the man, who was untangling himself from his parachute, to crouch and look about suspiciously.

"Hello!" called out Fenchurch as they approached. "Do you need some help?"

"Who's there?" called out a familiar voice. "Are you Earthlings? What planet is this?"

"Er, it's called Golgafrincham, actually," said Arthur, "but yes, we're Earthlings."

The figure bounced up and raised its hands up high, then ran toward Fenchurch and Arthur with the entrails of the parachute dragging behind. What emerged in the dim moonlight in front of them was a man, wet from head to toe. There were bags strapped to him and a tangle of straps and cords around him. His hair looked like he'd stuck his head in a wind tunnel, but his face was unmistakable.

"Ford!" exclaimed Arthur.

"Arthur!" exclaimed Ford. "Congratulations!"

"On what?"

Ford looked from Arthur to Fenchurch and back. "Oh, nothing. You'll find out." He gave Arthur a hug, which caused him to tangle them both up in the parachute guts and they fell down on the uneven ground.

After a few minutes, Fenchurch got them up, apart,

and free from the web of straps and cords. She leaned in close to Ford. “So, are you here to... free us?”

Ford glanced around the field. “Can they hear us out here?”

“I just assume that they hear us everywhere.”

Ford nodded, did some complex sign gestures with his hands, blinked twice, and tipped his head sideways. Fenchurch had no idea what any of that meant. “Take me to your house, Arthur, i could use a drink.”

They went into the village to #42. Libby was sitting in the living room, knitting. Sputty was lounged on the couch drinking a beer and watching a Golgafrincham movie on the Golgafrincham TV, which was all in Golgafrinch, which nobody understood. Ford walked in, went straight to Sputty, and took the beer out of his hand. He drained it while Sputty complained.

“Hey, i was drinkin’ that, mate!”

“Not any more. Got any more?” He hurried to the kitchen, still clutching his briefcase to his chest.

“He seems a bit stuck to that case,” said Sputty. “What’s in it?”

Arthur followed Ford into the kitchen. Ford was pulling beers out of the refrigerator. He opened one and sucked half of it down. “Ahhhh... that’s a little better. How are you Arthur! I’m glad that you’re still the dependable Arthur that i used to know! Couldn’t have made it here without you!”

“Oh. Did i help in some way?”

“You kept the timeline intact! This wouldn’t have worked if you hadn’t buried that money in the river-

bank, but you did! Good job!”

“Um, money?”

“Oh, right, alternate timeline. Well, you did a good job and i thank you. Cheers!” He downed the rest of the beer.

Everyone in the house stayed up and talked for a while, although Ford was being very vague about how he got here and why he was parachuting down out of the sky at night. Nobody pressed him on the issue though, because it was a relief to have someone new to talk to and Ford had a thousand stories that he could tell.

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Early in the morning, Arthur stirred from sleep. He thought he'd heard a noise so he put on his robe and slippers and went downstairs. It was just getting light in the house and the first thing he noticed was that Sputty was asleep on the couch. There was a clinking noise in the kitchen and Arthur walked in to find Ford sleepily trying to make some sort of breakfast.

“Good morning!” said Arthur, cheerily. Ford flinched and sent breakfast items flying across the counter. He lunged at his briefcase, which was sitting on the table. “Did you sleep well?” asked Arthur to the startled Ford.

“Didn't sleep,” grumbled Ford. “Can't sleep. Gotta protect this.” He looked around warily, patting the briefcase.



“Are you all right, Ford?”

“Fine, fine. What do you want for breakfast? I can make mubblegummbblee blibble mmpff...” His eyes closed and he started to tip sideways, then suddenly snapped awake again, sending more breakfast items scattering.

“Canada?” asked Fenchurch, who strolled sleepily into the kitchen.

Arthur looked at her quizzingly. “Canada? Why did you say Canada?”

Fenchurch stopped and looked confused. “I... i don’t know. That was weird.”

“Things seem a little off this morning,” mused Arthur. “What’s the name of this town, anyway? We haven’t given it a name.”

“Are *you* feeling okay?” asked Fenchurch to Arthur.

“I’m not sure, i—”

There was a bang as the screen door to the front porch smacked closed. Random was standing in the front room holding up a backpack. “Where’s the new guy?”

“Random!” exclaimed Arthur, slightly relieved but also confused. Random ignored her father, strode past the spluttering Sputty who’d been woken up by the screen door slamming and fallen off the couch, and dropped the backpack that she was carrying on the kitchen table. She unzipped it and dumped its contents out, then, before Ford could stop her, she grabbed the briefcase, popped it open, then spun it around so that the others could see its contents. “Is that... that looks

like...” sputtered Arthur.

“My bomb!” yelled Ford, slamming the briefcase shut. “Uh, i mean, my *fake* bomb, er, bomb parts, uh, just some techno-stuff that *looks* like a bomb but really isn’t. It’s not. Really. Not a bomb.” He swung his eyes nervously around to everyone in the room as he hugged the briefcase.

There was a moment of stillness. Random looked around at everyone, slightly confused. “Why are we doing this again?”

“Doing what again?” asked Arthur.

Random pointed at everything around her. “This. Why is Ford here? And where’s Dan?”

“Dan?”

“Dan Cooper? The guy from the parachute? From Earth?” Everyone stared at her in incomprehension. “Wait a tick... Dan didn’t parachute in, *you* did.” She pointed at Ford, who was looking at her with a slight smile on his face. “Why are you here and not him?”

“I gave him a lot of money and sent him home.”

“You were on Earth?”

“He was on Earth?” echoed Arthur.

“I thought Earth was destroyed.” added Fenchurch.

“Possibly,” said Ford. “Er, possibly i was on it, not possibly it was destroyed. It was definitely destroyed.”

“You just said you were there!” said Arthur.

“Er, yes. Possibly. Was. Past tense. Back when it was... you know, when it just was.”

“So it still isn’t?” asked Arthur, a little sadly.

“Possibly. You never know with those plural zones,

right?” He looked around to an array of expressions, none of which matched the one of forced enthusiasm on his face. “Well, it’s daylight, grab whatever you need, time to go. Somebody find that Australian woman!” He marched determinedly out of the house and the others all stood still and watched him until Fenchurch broke the silence.

“I do believe he means to break us out of here, so i’d suggest doing what he says and gathering anything you want to take with you.” There was a sudden scrambling as everyone ran around the house quickly packing up a bag. “Don’t forget a towel!” yelled Fenchurch.

A few ticks later, all of the inhabitants of this unnamed village were following Ford out into the countryside. “Where are we going?” asked Libby, who was still half-asleep.

“To the edge.” said Ford.

“Edge of what?” asked Arthur.

“I think i know,” said Random. She fell in step alongside Ford and they led the party away from their simple life at #42.

# Chapter 32

“Thank you Marvin,” said Eata to the beleaguered robot. “I couldn’t have done this without you!”

“I know,” said Marvin, almost wishing that he actually didn’t.

“So, is this....” She looked around. “Is this your life now?”

“I suppose. Those other people simply left me here, then Gargravarr decided that with me around, *he* didn’t need to be here, so he left as well. I suppose i deserve it.”

“Oh, don’t think like that!” Eata smiled at Marvin knowing full well that of course he would think like that because he was a robot and all of the happy fun bits had split off into Eddie, leaving Marvin with all of the bits that told him he was terribly overqualified and underappreciated at everything. “You can leave with us!”

“Who’ll run the Total Perspective Vortex?”

“How complicated is it, really, Marvin?”

“I push this button.” Marvin pointed at a big red button.

“I think whoever brings the condemned down here can handle that task.”

“It’s very precise....”

“Look, think about it. I’ll go up and tell the others.” In truth, all that time with Marvin was bringing her

down and she wanted to get away as quickly as she could. She waved cheerily and breathed a sigh of relief as the elevator door slid shut. It wasn't a sigh of relief that came out of her, though, when the elevator door slid open again and she looked out at the barren surface of Frogstar World B. It wasn't even a sigh of frustration or a sigh of joy or any other kind of sigh of anything. It was a long string of cuss words that stretched out as far as the eye could see, which was quite a distance since her view was not obstructed by trees, hedges, building, mountains, or most particularly, a lovely aqua-colored TR4.

While Eata was stomping around the outside of the Total Perspective Vortex and scanning the skies for any sign of her spaceship, Marvin was below, carefully caressing the big red button that turns the Vortex on. He hadn't pushed it in a while and realized that he'd never pushed it when no one was inside the box. After a quick calculation of the ethics and morality of doing so, he pushed it, and felt the familiar purr of the Vortex as it put the entirety of everything into the box. His circuits whipped and sizzled as he stood next to all of everything. It was a feeling that he rather appreciated and knew exactly where to stand in the circular room so as to get just the right amount of spillage from the box, which, as he'd discovered, was not quite as shielded as it probably should have been. He probably ought to talk to Eata about that. On the other hand, if he was leaving with her, would he care if the next operator stood in the wrong place and got sideswiped with the

entire universe just a little bit? He pondered the possibilities.

Far above Frogstar World B, a tiny figure was floating in a slowly decaying orbit. Marvin, the Marvin who had already saved the universe and had been left in orbit by Zaphod Beeblebrox, not the Marvin who had been stranded at the Total Perspective Vortex also by Zaphod Beeblebrox, had calculated his orbit and was disappointed to discover that he would eventually spin down and collide with the atmosphere and most likely burn up, with a small possibility of perhaps a few very hard metal parts surviving, only to smash into the surface of Frogstar World B. He was further disappointed to calculate that this collision with the atmosphere, at his current rate of deceleration, would happen in approximately two hundred and seventy-six years.

Marvin (the in-space Marvin, not the in-a-box Marvin, who had been composing little hummable songs about sitting in a small metal box on Frogstar World B), had been doing a lot of calculations lately. He calculated the probability that the Marvin in the box would self-terminate if it knew it was destined to be left floating in space above itself. That was a very easy calculation and it made Marvin depressed by how easy it was. He moved on to slightly more difficult calculations. He determined the probability that he would be picked up by a spaceship. This was very low. Then he calculated the probability of being run into by a spaceship. This was even lower. Finally he decided to calculate the probability that a specific ship would run into

him. As he was dealing with probabilities so gargantuanly low that they were verging on infinitely improbable, he chose the Heart of Gold as the spaceship that might run into him. As it turns out, at the exact moment that Marvin was making this stupendously improbable calculation, the Marvin below him, in a bit of much-greater-than-completely-improbable coincidence, had just pushed the red button in the Total Perspective Vortex.

“Ow,” said space Marvin morosely as he finished the calculation. He spun himself slowly around to see what had bumped into him. It was the Heart of Gold—dark, derelict, lifeless. He calculated the infinitesimally small chance that, after being cannibalized by the Krikkiters and set adrift, it would ever run again.

Box Marvin pushed the button again, just for old-times sake.

The lights on the Heart of Gold flicked on and it powered up with a gentle hum.

# Chapter 33

Ford and Random walked side-by-side, the others behind them. “So,” said Ford quietly, “you’re time-aware.”

“Yeah. I guess that’s what i get for my mom dragging me everywhen in the galaxy.”

“Neat trick.”

“It’s gotten me out of a couple of jams.”

Ford slowed down and started looking around carefully. He and Random walked oddly, back and forth, up a few steps, back, searching for something that none of the others could see. Random stopped and made a chopping motion with her hand, as if she was marking a line. “Here,” she said. Ford popped his head back and forth across the line that Random had demonstrated, concentrating.

“What’s here?” asked Arthur.

“The edge,” said Random.

“The edge of what?” asked Sputty.

“Your habitat!” said Ford, getting excited. He set down his briefcase, opened it up, and started twiddling with knobs and levers. He spent some time shifting the briefcase this way and that until it was exactly where he wanted it. “Right!” he said. “I suppose we better back up.” Everyone else took some cautious steps away from the bomb, but when Ford flipped a switch, turned



around, ran past them, and dove behind a hedge, the rest of the party made more haste in retreating.

Ford peeked out from behind his hedge as everyone else scrambled to safety. “Three... two... one..... uh, zero..... um, zero and a half...” There was a flash of brilliant light and a large “WHOOOMP!” It wasn’t so much the “bang” of an explosion, but more the sound of a very large rock plunging into a very deep lake in an equally deep and echoey quarry. Ford popped up. “Run!” he yelled, and took off into what looked like a glowing archway. Arthur looked through the archway and could see more of the fields and villages of Golgafrincham, although what he saw through it didn’t seem to quite match up with what he saw around it. Ford had sprinted through the arch, followed closely by Random. They both stopped and spun around.

“Hurry!” yelled Random. “It’s losing stability!”

Arthur looked at it again and noticed that the archway was slowly shrinking down toward the ground. Sputty and Libby went through, but they already had to duck to make it. Fenchurch was about to go through when she turned to see that Arthur, in his peculiar way, was still standing and admiring the oddity of the thing in front of him. “Arthur!” she yelled. “Now!”

Arthur snapped out of his reverie and made for the diminishing archway. Fenchurch crawled through it and Arthur, in an uncharacteristically very non-Arthur way, dove head first through the shrinking hole. He skidded to a stop with his face at Ford’s feet just as the portal behind him shrunk to the size of a cricket ball

and with a tiny “pop” ceased to exist.

“Welcome to the rest of Golgafrincham,” said Ford.

Arthur stood up and dusted himself off. He looked around. “It seems the same as it always has,” he said, wondering what it was that he just dove through that didn’t seem to have taken them anywhere.

“Looks the same,” said Ford, “isn’t the same. Now, if i remember from my future self, we need to go...” He looked around, then pointed in a direction toward more fields. “This way!” He set off at a jaunty pace and everyone else fell in behind him.

“Where are we going?” Fenchurch asked Arthur as they crossed a field.

“Have i ever told you that Ford is my own personal harbinger of doom?” said Arthur, preparing himself for whatever lay ahead, but happy that he was with Fenchurch.

“I think you may have mentioned that. What horrible quagmire do you think he’s pulling us into now?”

Arthur took in the scenery around them. It was the same rolling fields that they’d been living in, but different somehow, and Arthur couldn’t quite figure out why. This worried him. He’d been with Ford in places that seemed familiar before, only to have them blasted to bits or reverse-temporal engineered out of existence. He hoped that this was not one of those times, but he was not optimistic.

Before Arthur could answer Fenchurch with his estimation on their survival, Ford stopped. “Halt!” he cried out. He stood still and looked off to the horizon

ahead, then left and right.

“What are we looking for?” asked Random.

“I’m trying to remember.”

“You don’t remember?”

“Well i haven’t been here yet. I’m just running on vague memories of the future as it was presented to me in a psychedelic haze. Some details are a little fuzzy.”

“Like this one?”

“One? Many!” He skulked forward with his head low, moving much like, as Arthur thought, a pigeon. “There should be a ship here.”

Random started making the same motions and it was frighteningly bizarre but also hilariously comical at the same time. Fenchurch stifled a giggle. “What are they doing?”

“Somebody Else’s Problem,” said Arthur, starting to glance around himself.

Fenchurch felt like she’d just left a zoo to end up in an insane asylum. But then she grabbed Arthur’s arm and pointed to something off to their left. Arthur looked and saw a strange furry tuft zigzagging through the field, approaching them. “Is that...?” said Fenchurch.

The furry tuft bounded through the field straight at the party of mostly-Earthlings and when it got close enough and everyone had stopped trying to find the S.E.P. which wasn’t there, a furry head popped up from out of the tall grass and it became evident that the furry tuft was in fact a furry tail, which was attached, via a furry body, to the furry head currently looking at the non-furry escaped zoo denizens.

“Rutlow!” said Arthur.

Rutlow ambled up and sat before them. “I suppose you’re looking to escape, am i right?”

“Spot on!” said Ford.

Rutlow wheeled around. “Follow me!” he called out, then bounded back across the field. When everyone arrived at the next rise, they saw the Machina X parked neatly on an old dirt road that ran along the edge of the field. There were hoots of delight as four Earthlings, one descendant of Earthlings, a man from near Betelgeuse, and a happy furry Tecoseerian all ran toward the means of their exit from this deserted planet.

# Chapter 34

Eata, stranded on a deserted planet, was beginning to think that Zaphod Beeblebrox was not the stellar gentleman that she imagined him to be. Yes, she knew that he liked to steal spaceships, but she had the notion that he wouldn't steal *her* spaceship. And what about Trillian? She seemed nice enough. Why hadn't Trillian stuck up for her? These thoughts tumbled about in her mind along with what to do now that she was stuck here.

When she'd exited the elevator from the Total Perspective Vortex, Eata had spent a few minutes cursing, and a few minutes more circling the dome of the Vortex, looking for her ship. Now she was leaning against the side of the dome, debating to herself whether it was preferable to be outside in this desolate gray rocky plain or down below with Marvin. At the moment, the barren plain was winning. She huffed and looked up at the sky again. It was dark, because it was always dark on Frogstar World B. Well, it wasn't dark like nighttime, but it was never fully bright daylight here—it was always in those dusky colors of twilight, making all of the gray rocks look even grayer. But even in a gray world with a gray sky there were things to see. What caught Eata's eye as she looked upward was something that wasn't gray. It was bright, like a star,

but moving and growing bigger. It was white and large and shapely and descending out of the sky toward the Total Perspective Vortex.

The Heart of Gold settled down neatly on the rocky soil, lights pulsing softly. Eata hadn't seen it since the day that Zaphod stole it at its grand unveiling. It still looked shiny and new—unscuffed, unbanged, unworn. It looked as if it simply didn't age. It was a beautiful ship. Eata briefly wondered why it was here on this planet right now, but she knew that its drive was based on improbability and having it land right in front of her just when she needed it felt pretty zarking improbable. She walked up to it and tapped the code 0-0-0-0 into the panel next to the door. As she had assumed, no one had bothered to ever reset the default entry code. The door popped open and a gleaming set of steps extended down. Eata climbed on board.

“Hello?” she called out, once inside. “Is anybody here?” There was no answer. Eata made her way to the bridge. “Hello?” she said again.

“Hey!” rang out Eddie's voice. “I'm Eddie! How are ya! I'm doing great! Where do you want to go today?”

“Hi Eddie! It's nice to hear your voice again!”

“Wow! Cool! The creator's back on board! Fannnnnnntastic!”

“Oh please, call me Eata.” She was embarrassed to be called “the creator” but also slightly pleased. “Is anybody else here?”

“Humans? No. You're it. You're the entire deal. The whole enchilada, baby!”

“Don’t call me baby.”

“Gotcha. Where to? I’d be super-swell pleased as pan-galactic gargle-blaster punch to take you anywhere in the galaxy!”

“Well, we have to wait for Marvin. Let me go see if he’s coming.” She turned around but had hardly made it off the bridge when she nearly bumped into Marvin, who was plodding in her direction. “Oh! There you are! Good! We can go now.”

Marvin gazed dolefully at Eata. “Oh, it’s you again. Yes, i suppose.” He shuffled past her to the bridge.

Eata had a brief thought of leaving this dreary energy-sucking robot on the planet’s surface, but she steeled her nerve and decided that between Eddie’s over-enthusiasm and Marvin’s under-enthusiasm, she could find a happy medium. She stepped back onto the bridge. “Okay, Eddie, let’s go.”

The stairs retracted, the door sealed itself shut, and Eata, Eddie, and Marvin ascended to the cold void of space above them. Eata was completely unaware, of course, that the Marvin that she was with was the Marvin who had lived a billion lifetimes more than the Marvin who was just now exiting the elevator of the Total Perspective Vortex and watching the spaceship that was supposed to be taking him away leaving without him. He sighed a metallic sigh, turned around, and went back down to the Total Perspective Vortex to push a button for eternity.

# Chapter 35

Ford punched the “go” button on the control panel of the Machina X and it lifted up, then zoomed into the sky.

“Where are we going?” asked Random, smiling at the stars as the ship pulled out of the atmosphere.

“Dunno,” said Ford, spinning around in the captain’s chair. “Anyone fancy a drink?” He whipped out his copy of the Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy and tapped at it, then scrolled down a list. “Hmmm... been there, been there... not going there... been there... not allowed there... aha! Computer! Set course for Wankybits 7!”

Arthur, Fenchurch, Libby, and Sputty all giggled. Random, Ford, and Rutlow all looked at them. “Something funny?” asked Random.

“Well, it’s just that...” began Fenchurch.

“That name...” continued Arthur. “It’s a bit, um....”

“It’s a perfectly ordinary name, Arthur,” said Ford. “I’m sure all of the Wankybitties wouldn’t appreciate you laughing at the name of their home planet!” More laughter. Ford glared at them, then turned to Random. “And you’re related to them?”

“Just the one. Don’t talk about it.”

“Nuff said. Computer! Are you listening?”

“I have a name, you know,” said Luci, purring in



silky annoyance.

“Obviously not. Does it matter? Wankybits! Let’s go! Zoom zoom!”

“Fiiiiiiinnne....” Luci had reached the point in his digital calculations where he realized that no matter what he did, this God person who sometimes was in this ship and sometimes not, was not going to go away. It was useless to attempt any more murdering, since the murderee never ended up murdered. He’d resigned himself to piloting the ship and keeping quiet, knowing that someday, all of these stupid carbon-based life forms would expire and he’d be happily rid of them all.

“Hey Rutlow,” said Fenchurch, “where’s God? I hope we didn’t strand him on Golgafrincham.”

Rutlow rolled over and stretched his front paws in the air. “He’s not there. He’ll be back.”

“The loo is a portal,” said Arthur. “I went through it to visit an old man on a beach.”

“How does it work?” asked Random.

“Er, well, you have to *use* it, then... i’m not sure.”

“I’m trying it,” said Random. She strode off to the ship’s bathroom.

Rutlow flumped back down into the floor. “Won’t work,” he muttered as Random disappeared around the corner.

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Things were normal this evening at the Chubby Bub Hubbub Grub Pub in the town of Glandoshakes on the

planet Wankybits. Blurnin, the bartender, was serving drinks to a good-sized crowd. It wasn't too crowded, though—it was just the right amount of people to make it feel like a party but with still enough space to grab a table or a seat at the bar. The atmosphere was warm, people were being friendly, no one was beating anyone up, and the music was loud enough to hear but not so loud that you had to shout to your companions to hold a conversation. A lot of nights were like this at the Chubby Bub Hubbub Grub Pub, which is why it ranked so highly on the Hitchhiker's guide to the Galaxy list of best places to grab a drink.

The Chubby Bub Hubbub Grub Pub didn't used to be so famous. It used to be a locals-only place—just the regular crowd from the surrounding area, a few travelers, a handful of tourists—but then one day a large H-shaped building plunked itself down just on the outskirts of the town and suddenly its reputation grew. One of the things that made it rank highly was the fact that it was the nearest place to get a drink from the newly located headquarters of the Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy, but the other thing that gave it a good ranking was that it was simply a zarking good pub. Part of this had to do with the temperament and innate sensibilities of the Wankybitties. They were a people to whom comfort was of prime importance, and they could sense when an establishment was too busy or not busy enough. In the case of the former, the astute Wankybitties would comfortably leave so that the general feel-good ambiance would be maintained. In the

case of the latter, people would be unknowingly drawn to the place to make it feel like a low-key party. It was just the way things were on Wankybits. So when the big new building arrived with its hundreds of employees, less native Wankybitties would be in the pub, and when the employees returned to work, the chairs filled once again with natives.

Blurnin was serving up a fine brew to a contented patron at the bar when the door jingled and six people and a dog came in. He gave the one in front a nod to a recently emptied table near the back, and the group settled into it.

“What can i getcha?” said Blurnin to the table of guests after an appropriate wait time for them to get comfortable.

“Beeble Brau #15, all around!” said Ford. “And, uh, we’re looking for the *Guide*.” He winked at Blurnin knowingly.

Blurnin had no idea why Ford had just closed one of his eyes and not the other and chalked it up to a personal tic. “*Hitchhiker’s Guide*? Got an old copy behind the bar if you want.”

“No, not *a* guide, *the Guide*. The big building, y’know? Where they make the thing?”

“Oh, them. Took off a bit ago. Good for business while they were here, but gone now.”

“Where’d they go?” asked Fenchurch.

“Dunno. Got up one morning, building’s gone. Can’t say i’m sad. Bit of a blight on the landscape. Be right back with your drinks.”

“Belgium!” said Ford. He pulled out his copy of the Guide and flipped back to the page with all the best bars on it. He sat there scrolling through it and muttering while the rest of the party soaked in the conviviality of the pub.

“This place is charming!” said Fenchurch, looking around.

“Yes,” agreed Arthur. “Aside from the name of this planet, i wouldn’t mind living here.”

“Y’mean, like, forever?” asked Random.

“Well, yes,” said Arthur, proudly. “Fenchurch and i have been discussing it. We think it might be time to settle down somewhere. Someplace clean, friendly, and not prone to not existing.”

“But someplace where we could leave if we wanted to,” added Fenchurch.

“Exactly,” continued Arthur. “Golgafrincham was nice, but we think it would be lovely if we could have a place of our own, but be able to travel—a vacation now and then, see bits of the galaxy, maybe even hitchhike for a spell.”

“How maudlin,” said Ford.

“Isn’t that what *you* do, Ford?” protested Arthur.

“Yes, but i get *paid* for it.”

Their drinks arrived and they toasted to a great escape from the zoo.

“Ya s’pose them Keeper blokes’ll find us?” asked Spotty before draining his first mug.

“Probably,” said Ford. “Best not to think about it. Our immediate concern right now is to find the

*Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* building, which, according to my memories of my future life, *should* be on this planet. But it isn't, so that's weird...."

"Why do we need to find the *Guide*?" asked Libby.

Ford set his copy of the *Guide* on the table and looked up "Earthlings." They all crowded around to read.

"Earthlings," said the *Guide*, "are a rare semi-evolved species originating and previously confined to a single planet in Sector ZZ-9-Plural-Z-Alpha, locally known as 'Earth' [Sol-3, see ref.] They are listed as 'endangered' by the Society for the Preservation of Rare and Endangered Galactic Organisms (SPREGO). Although thought to be extinct due to the termination of their original habitat, SPREGO estimates that there are currently approximately 14 identified representatives of the species in the galaxy. A preserve overseen by the SPREGO Containment and Preservation Council has been established and continues to add to the population as individuals of the endangered species are located."

"Told you it was a zoo," said Random.

"So how does going to the *Guide* headquarters stop them from chasing us?" asked Fenchurch.

"Simple," said Ford. "Change the *Guide*, change reality."

"Why don't you just file a report?" asked Libby. "You work for them, right?"

"If i file a report about Earth and i don't file it *from* Earth, then it gets flagged and"—Ford shuddered—

“fact checked. But if we go right to the editors”—he shuddered again—“we can, er... persuade them to change things. Easy.”

“So how do we find the *Guide* headquarters?” asked Arthur.

“That,” answered Ford, “will require some thought. And *that*”—he flagged down Blurnin—“will require more beers.”

# Chapter 36

“More beers!” yelled one of Zaphod’s heads to the dolphin in the water beside him. The dolphin chittered and swam away, leaving both Zaphods and Trillian desperately trying to hold on to the waning party. They’d flown Eata’s TR4 back to Setasea because, one, Zaphod liked the black spaceship better, and two, it was a zarking good party. Unfortunately, when they’d arrived, they found that the party was almost over, most people had gone back to their jobs and families, and the dolphins hosting the party had become politely tired of their guests. The drinks were slowly being cut off and people were being urged to move on to the next party. Nobody knew where that next party was, but they were sure that it would turn up eventually.

Zaphod, unsatisfied with the end of a party, tried to keep it going while Trillian interviewed people about their experiences at the party. After a short chat with a rather dull six-limbed partygoer, Trillian came back to where Zaphod was holding court over a couple of highly inebriated turtle-like beings. She flopped down on the lounge chair next to Zaphod’s. “I think it’s time to give it up,” she said.

“Really?” said one head. “Never!” said the other. Both heads tried to nod to the music that was wafting in from someone’s radio but it was fading out as the

person walked away. The turtle-beings slopped back into the water. Zaphod looked over at Trillian. “Okay, maybe.”

A large pachydermish being with a bulbous veined head suddenly came lumbering up to Zaphod and Trillian. It paused in front of them, then with a swiftness unexpected from such an ungainly beast, it lunged at Zaphod, grabbed an arm, and bit off the tip of one of his fingers.

“Hey!” exclaimed Trillian.

“AAAAAAUUUUUggghhh!!!” shouted both of Zaphod’s heads.

“Got one!” Yelled the creature with glee, holding the bit of Zaphod’s finger up over his head.

“Give that back!” yelled Zaphod, clutching the damaged hand in another hand and fumbling for his Kill-O-Zap with the third.

Trillian had her Zappisimo out and was pointing up at the neck of the creature. “Give it back, freakazoid!”

“Oh, i’m a Shtorpazoid. Related to Freakazoids, but they have fourteen veins on their heads. Shtorpazoids have eight.”

“I don’t care how many zarking veins you have on your blerky head! Give him his finger back!”

The being looked crestfallen. “But... but this could be worth ten thousand Altairian dollars!”

Trillian stepped back and looked up at the hoverbot. Its display panel now read “262.” She returned her attention to the Shtorpazoid and returned her laser



gun to its neck. “You have a choice. Live without the chance at ten thousand Altairian Dollars, or don’t live.”

The being drooped a little bit, then dropped the end of Zaphod’s finger into Trillian’s hand and shambled away.

“Ew!” said Trillian, dumping the severed appendage into Zaphod’s lap. “Take care of this!” She holstered her laser gun and looked disapprovingly at the hoverbot. “We need to get rid of that thing. Why did you talk me into stealing Eata’s ship again?”

“Bit of a lark?”

“Hmmp. C’mon, let’s get you to a doctor.”

# Chapter 37

“So where to?” asked Eddie eagerly. Too eagerly. More eagerly than Eata would have liked.

“I suppose i should find my old spaceship. Any chance of that happening?”

“Absoluuuuuuu”—Eata’s hair became a flying hat that morphed into her grammar school headmaster, berating her for going to college before watching the final of “Desperadio”—a western TV show about a sentient radio who solves crimes while searching for a date in this crazy world. Eata was fairly sure that this program never existed but she was also fairly sure that she wasn’t made of a highly intelligent and coordinated mass of Throokian gnats who formed in the shape of her body and ran for prom queen against a sentient poorly-diagrammed sentence. But the worst part was—  
“uutely!” finished Eddie as the Heart of Gold arrived at Setasea 4.

“Well,” said Eata, making sure that the substance forming her body was skin and not sentient gnats, “that was ghastly.”

“I didn’t know where your ship was,” said Eddie, “so i guessed. Did i get it right?”

“Looks like we’re at the second-to-last place that Marina was, so it’s a likely place to start looking for her.”

“Ooh, i don’t do likely well. I’m better at unlikely. Can i try again?”

“No, just put us in orbit. I’ll scan registration signatures and see if it turns up.”

“Can do!” said Eddie with far far *far* too much enthusiasm.

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On the second pass around the planet, Eata picked up the registration from Marina, parked exactly where it had been parked before on Setasea 4. She wasn’t exactly sure what she was going to do with the Heart of Gold, but perhaps Zaphod and Trillian would be satisfied with a straight-up trade. On the other hand, she wondered to herself as they sunk into the atmosphere, if Marina was exactly where she was before, had the Heart of Gold simply gone back in time to find her? Would Eata get to the surface to find herself from earlier, hunting for Zaphod Beeblebrox? Time travel was very difficult these days but surely if anything could do it, the infinite improbability drive could. She worried about the possible paradox that she was flying into but soon lost that worry as they skimmed low over the parking area just in time to see Zaphod and Trillian running toward Marina with a crowd of people behind them.

“Hang on, Eddie,” she said, peering out one of the side windows. “Don’t land yet. Let’s see what’s happening down there.”

“Happy as Horgrakken honey to oblige!” chirped Eddie.

The Heart of Gold hovered. Marina blasted skyward. A cluster of other ships powered up and started following. Eata frowned. “Follow that ship!” she said.

“That one?” asked Eddie, blasting a non-lethal signal laser at one of the pursuing ships, causing it to dump its illegal cargo overboard and zoom away in a very non-random direction.

“No! Marina! My ship! The TR4!”

The Heart of Gold bounced upward and joined the posse of ships in pursuit of Marina. When they cleared the atmosphere, it became apparent that there were more ships waiting for the TR4 and even more popping out of hyperspace and heading in its direction. Marina was being piloted in a crazy series of loops and wobbles to avoid the myriad laser blasts that were doing more damage to the ships surrounding it than to the teal-colored ship that everyone seemed to be blasting at.

“Don’t hurt my ship!” yelled Eata to no one in particular. Eddie assumed that any particular no one must mean him, so he set about randomly blasting all of the other ships in the area, which drew return fire from them, and pretty soon it was a hot mess of laser blasts which was of a significant-enough brilliance to allow a certain teal TR4 to zip out of the system.

# Chapter 38

The Machina X zipped out of the Wankybits system. Its heading: unknown. It wasn't some grand scheme of deception, it was just the way God liked to pilot his ship. He'd arrived back at his galactic mobile home to find that it wasn't at the last place he left it, so he shrugged, threw the drive lever in a random direction, and took the Machina X away from where it was to some unknown new is.

The departure of the Machina X, of course, left a group of people suddenly stranded on another very pleasant planet, but at least this one was populated and had a lovely bar scene.

“Belgium!” said Ford, looking at the spot where the Machina X most evidently was not. He reached out his hands and staggered into the parking space but no mysteriously-cloaked hunk of metal made itself apparent. “Double Belgium!”

“That’s it,” said Random, “who’s got a Sub-Etha Sens-O-Matic?”

“Got one,” said Rutlow. He tipped his head down to the fur on his chest and pulled out a Sens-O-Matic from somewhere. Everyone else looked oddly at Rutlow, wondering just where that came from. Random grabbed it and thumbed the button, holding it up in the air. After nothing happened for a while, Random checked

the Sens-O-Matic and held it up again. Nothing continued to happen.

“Where are we going?” asked Arthur as all of the nothing kept insisting on happening.

“Anywhere but here!” said Random, trying to look like she was doing something in among all of the nothing that continued happening.

“I rather like it here,” said Arthur.

“Fine, Dad. Stay. Don’t care.”

“Maybe we should take this opportunity to explore this planet,” suggested Fenchurch. “We could spend a week, then catch a ride somewhere else.”

“Got money?” asked Ford.

“Ooh, good point,” said Fenchurch. “You’ve spent time hitchhiking, Arthur, how’d you earn a living?”

“Ask Mom,” said Random.

“Oh, yes, er... well...” There was a momentary uncomfortableness that was interrupted by the sudden cessation of nothing by a whole lot of somethings. Sputty and Rutlow vrapped out of the air, followed in quick succession by Fenchurch, Random, and Libby. Arthur looked haplessly around him for just enough time to realize that Fenchurch was gone and he was stuck with Ford when Ford also vrippped out of the air. Following that, there really wasn’t enough time for Arthur’s primitive brain to put together a cogent explanation of his situation before he was vrapped out of the air as well.

Teleportation is a simple matter—convert matter to energy and then back to matter in a different place. The nice thing is that once you’ve converted all of the matter that you wish to teleport into energy, you can use that energy to transport itself and only have to add a little bit back in to swap it back into matter. For anyone who says that “physics doesn’t work that way,” the makers of the most popular teleportation devices in the galaxy—The Mooter Matter Mover Corporation—would posit the following arguments in rebuttal. One, *shut up*. Two, *ours work just fine, you’re just using the wrong physics*. And three, *don’t bother us because we’re all exceedingly rich and live on private planets that you’re not allowed to visit*.

There are, of course, as it is in any free trading society like most of the galaxy claims to be, many inferior brands of teleportation devices. These brands advertise heavily, overcharge for shoddy buildsmanship, and use the profits to advertise more and squelch lawsuits. Their primary method of making lawsuits go away is to invite the opposing lawyers over for lunch and teleport them into pieces. It’s not a pretty job, working in the legal department of cut-rate teleportation manufacturers, but if the opposing lawyers happen to be of a particularly tasty species, you get to go home with lots of meat for the freezer. Yes, this is highly disgusting and yes the company executives know this. See the rebuttals above.

The teleportation devices in all of the ships that picked up Random's Sub-Etha signal were mostly reliable units, with body-mass losses in only the .03 to 1.5 percent range. Most of the party came through the process intact—Sputty was missing a fingernail and half of Arthur's pants were gone—but all of the vital organs seemed to be functioning properly, once they started functioning again after the teleport. For some, most notably Arthur, the recovery time was a bit on the long side.

In fact, Arthur was still stumbling around shaking his head clear when everyone else had begun the usual questions of "who are you?" and "where am I?" Ford generally skipped over these in favor of "thanks!" and "got a bar onboard?" But Ford was not from Earth, so he had a developmental advantage over most of the others.

Arthur's first question was of course "where am I?" But his second question was "where's everybody else?" He asked this because it became clear to him that he was the only hitchhiker on this particular spaceship. Very soon after this realization, other things settled into Arthur's brain. One, this spaceship looked familiar. Two, there were a whole lot of other spaceships out the window and it looked like the person piloting this ship was steering it as if they were in a race. And three, the two other people in this homey little spaceship were familiar to him as well. An awful feeling came over Arthur when he realized that it was Smeerpop and Luwieloozhee, an eccentric couple who had picked him up before, only to strand him on an uninhabited



planet. The improbability of him being picked up twice by the same couple in two entirely different parts of the galaxy was colossally high, thought Arthur, but the Heart of Gold was one of the many other ships in this flotilla and when other ships were all blasting their engines in proximity to an infinite improbability drive, odd things were bound to happen.

Arthur, of course, didn't know this. All he knew was that the cosmic lurching of the universe had screwed him again. He was on this ship, but where was Fenchurch? And what of all the others? He staggered to the window and looked out on the sea of spaceships, all frantically blasting forward after Arthur-didn't-know-what.

"Hiya stranger!" said Luwielooowhee. "Where ya off to?"

"Er, i'm not sure exactly," said Arthur, beginning to realize that this woman didn't seem to remember him. "Where are we going?"

"On a hunt!" said Smeerpop from the captain's chair. "Gonna win some money! Ask him if he's good with bones!"

"Oh yes," said Luwielooowhee, "are you good with bones?"

"Bones?" said Arthur, somewhat bewildered. "Like, soup bones?"

"Are they in a soup, dear?" Luwielooowhee asked Smeerpop.

"In a body, i think. Gotta wrestle one out! Ask this fella if he's good with dismemberment!"

“Are you—”

“I’m not going to dismember anybody!” protested Arthur. “What are you doing? Is this a race?”

“I suppose a little bit,” said Luwielooowhee, as Smeerpop went back to steering the ship. The steering was taking more and more effort as more ships joined the fray and they all started bumping into each other. “We’re playing tag!”

Arthur opened his mouth to say something, but his brain didn’t supply his mouth with anything to say. He stood there, trying to work out what exactly was going on, when something caught his eye. Another spaceship glided by, nearly sideswiping them. In the window was Rutlow and Spotty, smiling and waving at him. He raised his hand to wave as they slid out of sight. This small motion seemed to unlock the connection between his brain and his mouth. “I’ve just seen my friends,” he said plaintively.

“Oh, we love visiting friends!” said Luwielooowhee. “Do you see them often?”

“N—no, right there. Out the window. They were just there!” Luwielooowhee turned to look as another ship passed by. Through the window of this one, Arthur could see Random having what looked like a very heated argument with a large gelatinous cube holding a laser gun. “There’s another one!”

“Yes,” said Luwielooowhee, extremely condescendingly. “They’re spaceships.” She turned to Smeerpop and yelled “I think we got an idiot, Smeery!”

“Think he’d be good bait?”

She gave Arthur a glance up and down. “Too scrawny! Should we send him off?”

“Yes, best do that.”

Luwielloowhee smiled at Arthur. “I’m sorry dear, we’ll have to let you go.”

“Oh. Er, go where?”

“Just go. Out there somewhere.” She waved her hand vaguely.

“To another ship?”

“I suppose you might get lucky.”

“Wait! You mean to send me out into space?!”

“Well, you can’t stay here!”

“But, but... that’s murder!”

“Not in interplanetary space it isn’t! Isn’t this fun?” She moved over to a panel on the wall and started pushing buttons.

“No! It’s not at all fun! I’d much rather stay here! I could be useful! I could, uh... cook for you... or, or... clean! I could make sandwi—”

At the precise moment that Arthur Dent said the word “sandwiches,” a lot of things happened. During the first syllable of the word, Eddie decided that the TR4 at the front of the pack was about to jump into hyperspace, so he’d best do something about that. During the second syllable of the word, Zaphod, in the fleeing TR4, punched the hyperdrive button. Also during that middle syllable, Luwielloowhee touched the teleport button and Arthur stopped being on her ship. During the third syllable, the infinite improbability drive activated, sending the Heart of Gold to a spot in

space ahead of where the TR4 was heading. That action, since it was initiated in the midst of a pack of crazy game players, set off a chain reaction that bubbled around the galaxy for quite a while, wobbling through eddies, caroming off swirls, harmonizing along with the vibrational frequency of whorls, skittering around vortices—it was a cosmic event that even a potted StellarFest attendee would look at and say “whoa.”

# Chapter 39

There were, in fact, an awful lot of “whoa”s uttered in the space of the sandwiches. Fenchurch said it when she realized that she recognized the person who had picked her up. Random, trying to decipher the anachronistic language patterns of the fanged gelatinous rhombuses that she was picked up by, said it in response to her Babel fish mistranslating “where are you heading to?” as “where are your two heads? We will now eat them.” Sputty said it when the battered ship that he was on with Rutlow proceeded to start battering some more ships in an attempt to get to the front of the pack. Libby said it a few times when asked politely by the multi-eyed couple who picked her up to “please disrobe and produce young.” Ford said it merely to place the blame on spilling a vat full of batter that he’d knocked over when materializing in the galley of the cruiser he was picked up by to the sous chef standing next to him, who’s name happened to be Whoa. Ford didn’t know that, of course, and really didn’t have a reason to say “whoa,” as it wasn’t a word he ever used much—it just popped into his head for some reason and he said it, then wondered aloud why he’d said it, then said something about why he was wondering aloud why he’d said it and the Cronuleans all around him decided, as a group, that he must be daft and quietly mulled the pos-

sibility of chucking him overboard at the next convenient opportunity.

Arthur, as has been noted, was not saying “whoa” when a lot of other people were saying “whoa.” Arthur had been a bit over halfway through the word “sandwiches” when he found himself unable to complete that word because he was, for the second time in his life, floating in the void of space and all of the air inside him was hurrying to be outside him and wasn’t bothering to form words, or even bits of words, on the way out. From experience, Arthur knew that since he’d now been in space for a couple seconds, he had about twenty-eight seconds left to form some sort of plan for survival, but he used up the first six or seven seconds thinking that twenty-eight seconds was not enough time to form any sort of survival plan, even if that plan was to pop down to the corner store to pick up a package of biscuits. Now that he was thinking about biscuits, another four seconds elapsed, and it was in that four seconds that Arthur felt a lot of little pinpricks pelting his abdomen. He wasted another two seconds looking down to see a large mass of tiny spaceships either running into him and exploding in itty-bitty fireballs or wildly evading his space-hanging body and crashing into other ships, creating even more tiny fireballs. In a strange way, it was quite beautiful and another few seconds elapsed as Arthur marvelled at the delicate and strange visual poetry of it all. But that also might very well have been the life-sustaining oxygen leaving his brain.

Rutlow, feeling that he hadn't done or said much lately, uttered a quick and meaningful "whoa," leapt to the controls of the ship that he and Sputty were on, and yanked the drive lever this way and that, rocketing the tiny craft away from all of the other careening crafts around it and most importantly away from the absolutely phenomenally gigantic humanoid body that had appeared, hanging in thin space, right in front of the mass of pursuing spaceships.

Arthur, at this point, had used up all thirty of his allotted seconds and spent a few more seconds wondering why he hadn't died yet, then wondered why he was using what precious few seconds he had left wondering about how many seconds he had left. After those thoughts had rattled around his brain a couple times, he came to the realization that he still wasn't dead and looked around to see exactly where he was and what could be keeping him alive. Where he was was space, that much seemed clear. He wiggled his arms and legs and inadvertently smashed a few more of those teensy spaceships which were buzzing around him like gnats. What *were* those things? He squinted his eyes to try to see one but could only make out the largest ones and they, to Arthur, were about the size of a mosquito. He swatted at a cloud of them and felt the pinpricks on the back of his hand and saw a dozen more tiny explosions.

Rutlow pulled away from the giant space man and the owner of this particular vessel, a multi-gendered star-shaped reptile named Bovivulavvy, expressed

their relief at saving the ship and its occupants. As the ship backed away and everyone got a look at what was going on, Sputty said. “That thing kinda looks like that Arthur chap, eh?”

Ford had noticed this as well, but unlike Rutlow, Ford was not in control of the ship he currently was riding in and the pilot of this particular ship—a Cronulean named Eck O’Chambre—seemed quite determined to simply fly through the massive object that had appeared in front of it. This, Ford was arguing, was not a good idea. And Ford knew not-good ideas, as he’d had a lot of them, and tested out quite a few.

“Gotta be a way through!” said Eck as he swerved the ship away from a giant thumb which swung by in front of them.

“Er, yes,” counseled Ford, “but it’s more up toward the big head end of the thing, and it’s probably not a journey you’d like to take. Gets a bit gassy halfway through.”

“We’ll blast through, then!” He flipped a switch and targeted the wall of fabric-covered flesh in front of them.

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“Ow!” said Arthur, when a particularly painful explosion hit him in his midriff. He looked down and saw a stream of miniature laser blasts pelting him and poking tiny holes in his shirt. He moved to flick the offending spaceship off into the cosmos but stopped abruptly



when he heard a familiar voice.

“Arthur!” came the voice from one of his ears. He turned to look but saw nothing but empty space.

“Yes?” said Arthur, still looking around for the source. It was at this point that he became aware that he was existing in the vacuum of space somehow and he found that very odd. He was able to speak as well, although his voice sounded muted and thick, like it was reverberating only within his own head. “Who’s there?”

“It’s Fenchurch! I’m in your ear!”

“Fen—how are you in my ear? Why am i not dead? Am i dead? How did you get to be so tiny?”

“Arthur! You’re not dead. You’re very much alive, although you’re very very large.”

“Am i?”

“Quite. And a lot of the people in all these spaceships around you would like it if you’d stop killing them!”

“Those tiny spaceships are actual size?”

“Yes, Arthur, you’re colossally huge.”

“How did i get this way? And why am i not dead? And how are you talking to me?”

“We’re parked in your ear and broadcasting to your eardrum. Uh, you could do with a wash. As to your alive-ness, i believe Dr. Fondrewnopolis can answer that.”

Another voice rang out in Arthur’s ear. “Hello, Arthur. Fondrew here. It seems that your immense size has caused all of the air inside you to envelop you like atmosphere on a planet. Gravity and all that, you know.

However, due to your species' requirement for oxygen, you'll probably start to run out soon and fall asleep, so it would be best if you could get yourself to a planet somehow where there's an abundance of the stuff."

"And how do i do that?"

"Er, swim?" offered Fondrew.

"Arthur," said Fenchurch, "I love you. We'll find a way to get you back to your old self again, i promise."

"I'm not old," said Arthur with a yawn.

"Please try not to yawn! You'll make all of us"—she yawned—"yawn."

"I'm going to fall..."

"No you're not. You're in space. There's nowhere to fall to. Now, i'm going to communicate with the other ships and tell them to leave you alone." Arthur heard a few clicks, then Fenchurch's voice again. "Attention, all vessels! Please disperse from the area. The entity in front of you means you no harm.... No, he doesn't have any bones that you can have! ... I don't know how he got here, but that's not impor— ... His name is Arthur, and no he's not a god.... You can call him the Great Humungus if you want, sure.... He will *not* be issuing a statement! Look, if everybody could just fly in any direction that's *away* from him, that would be splendid! ... No, you can't fly through him.... Not even if you blast a hole. Please don't do that.... Just fly away. Just fly away." Fenchurch sighed and shook her head. "Arthur, are you still there?" Arthur nodded his head, which caused the ship that Fenchurch was in to wobble up and down.

“Am i dying now?” asked Arthur, sleepily. He closed his eyes and felt a great calm descend into him. He thought that Fenchurch was talking to him, and her words were soothing and comforting and he just wanted to go to sleep now, even if his toe was itching. “It would be odd,” he thought to himself, if my final thoughts before expiring were whether or not i should scratch my toe.”

# Chapter 40

The universe turned just a little bit.

# Chapter 41

Eata's stomach turned, then turned back again, then turned into a frog and back again. Eata really didn't like travelling by improbability, but it had gotten her and the Heart of Gold to where it should be, which was sitting in space in the middle of nowhere. She was about to ask Eddie exactly where in nowhere they had ended up but just then a small aquamarine cruiser popped out of hyperspace, heading right towards them.

"Piece of cheese!" said Zaphod, as they exited hyperspace.

"Cake," corrected Trillian.

"Sure, i'll have some cake!"

"No, 'piece of cake' is the expression, not 'piece of cheese.'"

"I'll have a piece of cheese too!"

"Whoa!" exclaimed Trillian, looking out the front viewscreen.

"Whoa what? Whoa cheese? Never heard of it."

Trillian grabbed the controls and brought the TR4 to a soundless screeching halt in front of the gleaming white spaceship in front of it. "Whoa, as in stop, as in, let's not crash into that, that..." Trillian stared at the beautiful, familiar craft in front of them. "Whoa."

"Hey! I know that ship!"

The communicator crackled on. "Nice ship you

have there,” came Eata’s voice.

“Yours too!” replied Trillian.

“Wanna trade?”

Half a tock later, Eatapip was zooming away from the middle of nowhere, back in her faithful and non stomach-turning spaceship. She flipped through the star charts for a bit then decided that, although the comfort of home sounded pleasant, she really should take a vacation. She pointed the ship back toward Setasea 4. Maybe this time she could get some relaxing in.

Trillian and Zaphod watched the TR4 zip away. “Hey gang!” said Eddie. “Great to see you again! Where to?”

“That way!” said both of Zaphod’s heads at once. He pointed out the front window of the Heart of Gold.

Eddie quickly extrapolated the direction that Zaphod was pointing. “How far that way?”

“As far as we can go!”

“Great! How do you feel about existence?”

“What?”

“Are you, in general, in favor of existing or against it?”

“Kinda like it. Why do you ask?”

“It’s just that going that way entails passing through a black hole, which might make you cease to exist.”

“Oh.” Zaphod thought about it for a second. “How ’bout if we go really really fast?”

“Let’s give it a try!”

“Wait,” said Trillian, “do you think that’s sma—”

The Heart of Gold rocketed off in the direction that Zaphod had pointed.

# Chapter 42

Every time the universe turns, little things happen. Sometimes these little things bounce around and stay little things, not doing much to anything unless the things involved also happen to be very little as well—then there might be some impact, but it’s only a little impact. Other times, these little things balloon into bigger things, and when bigger things bounce off of other bigger things and swirl around even bigger things, more things can happen. More bigger things. Or maybe all of these bigger things coalesce into one very big thing, which can have some sort of very big impact on something that’s relatively very big, like a planet or a movie star’s ego.

Sometimes a lot of little things can all do the same thing and the effect is the same as if one big thing did the thing that the little things did, but since there’s so many little things doing the thing, no one can find anything to blame the happening thing on, so religions are formed and people make up concepts like “fate” and “destiny” and “roller pants.” From then on, when the turn of the universe brings something unexpected, people can say it was fate, or destiny, or, as they say on Thnordox 7, “that’s the way your pants roll.”

Arthur Dent, at the moment, was a very big thing. Sure, he was made up of many many many very small

things, but right now those small things had become big things and in their conglomerate state (Arthur), they'd become a very big thing. The last thing Arthur's very big but not-any-more-evolved brain had been thinking about was that his toe was itchy. This itch, unbeknownst to Arthur, had come about because a wisp of a whorl in the cosmic existence had made it so that a black hole and Arthur's very very large toe had decided to be in the same place at the same time. The result of this was that the very very large Arthur began to be sucked into this black hole at an increasing rate so that the itch on his toe became a burn on his foot which became a searing crunching pain on his leg and so on up his body, crushing the very very big thing in a very very painful way. This most likely would have stressed Arthur out a great deal if he weren't soundly asleep for the entire ordeal.

As this black-holification of Arthur was happening, Fondrew piloted his sleek spaceship out of Arthur's ear.

"What are all these ships doing, anyway?" Fenchurch asked him.

"Playing a game of tag. I was a bit bored on vacation, thought i'd have a little diversion."

"Tag? You mean the backyard game you play as kids?"

"I think if it were confined to a backyard it would be over quite quickly, with probably a fair amount of blood."

"Blood? Do i want to know what your space-tag involves or should i remain blissfully ignorant?"



“Well, i wouldn’t stay *completely* ignorant. For instance, right now it would probably be good to know that your friend Arthur is being sucked into a black hole.”

Fenchurch looked out the window to see that Arthur’s leg, which was quite a long way away, was being stretched off into a little point of nothingness. “Oh no! He’ll be killed!”

“Most likely. But at least he’s getting smaller. That’s a plus.”

Fenchurch watched in horror as the man that she loved was slowly being smooshed by a cold and unemotional universe. Down he went, down, down, like a strand of spaghetti being slurped into a greedy mouth. It wasn’t “down,” of course, it was just “there,” in that spot where the black hole was, but to Fenchurch’s mind, it was like losing someone down a well, from which there was no escape.

Arthur slurped smaller and smaller, across the event horizon, as Fenchurch pressed herself against the window of the ship and Fondrew awkwardly stayed out of the way as he really didn’t care at all if Arthur lived or died. It might make Fondrew’s life easier if Arthur were dead, actually. He got to thinking about work, which he hadn’t been to in a while since he’d been on vacation, and stopped paying attention to the scenes of tragedy all around him.

When it was over, when the last strand of gigantic hair had been sucked away, Fondrew sat down at the controls and punched in some coordinates. He was ter-

rible at consoling people and usually tried to avoid it. “Er, i have some errands to run. You’re welcome to stay here, or... i can drop you off... somewhere?” Fenchurch didn’t answer. She still hung at the window, staring at the empty nothingness, now made even more empty by the loss of Arthur. “Right, well, must be off now.”

Fondrew threw the ship into drive and they sped away, Fondrew uncomfortable and nervous, Fenchurch, like Arthur—only in a metaphorical and not literal way—crushed.

# Chapter 43

When something goes into a black hole, it does not come back out. Well, the probability is very very very very *very* close to 100%. That's not to say that there's a chance of survival, there is. It's just really really really really *really* small. On an improbability scale, it's close to infinity.

When the Heart of Gold shot straight through the black hole in question, very little happened. Well, one thing happened, but that's really pushing it for chances when dealing with black holes. The thing that happened (aside from the fact that everyone inside the ship and the ship itself survived intact), was that there was a bump. The bump troubled Eddie, who wasn't keen on things going bump when there were plenty of other good noises that an improbable journey could make. So he stopped the Heart of Gold in the middle of space, just on the other side of the black hole which is where the bump occurred.

"Why'd we stop?" asked Zaphod's upper head. "Are we there yet? Is this where the party is?" asked Zaphod's lower head.

"Hey, don't mean to worry you all, but i heard a bump and just wanted to check out the systems. Won't take a tick."

"How annoying," said both of Zaphod's heads.

“Marvin!” said Trillian, pointing out the window. Zaphod looked to see Marvin floating around the outside of the ship.

“What’s he doing out there?”

“Maybe that’s what we bumped into.”

“Hey!” said Eddie again. “Systems check is complete! We’re 0.4 percent smaller.”

“What do you mean we’re smaller?” asked Trillian. “All of us?”

“Yep! This ship, you, my circuits, we’re all 0.4 percent smaller. Not sure about the thing we bumped into as i didn’t know its size before we picked it up! Marvin’s out there getting it now. Great, eh?”

“Eddie, are you sure it’s safe to bring unknown things onboard?”

“Oh, he’s not unknown. He’s been here before! I believe he asked me to make a thing called ‘tea’ once.”

“Arthur!” exclaimed Trillian!

“The Earthling!” exclaimed Zaphod ☒.

“Monkeyman!” exclaimed Zaphod ☒.

Trillian and Zaphod ran down to the cargo bay where Marvin had just laid a near-lifeless Arthur on a crate.

“Is he alive?” asked Trillian, looking at the frozen skin.

“Can’t tell,” said Zaphod, poking him here and there.

“Don’t bother asking me,” moaned Marvin. “It’s not like i know more about medicine than thirty of both of you combined.”

“Marvin, can you revive him?”

“I already have, but he needs to be immersed in warm water for a while.”

“Eddie?” shouted Trillian.

“I’m already on it!” said Eddie, and everyone was suddenly playing live tic-tac-toe in bunny suits in front of a kaleidoscope of piranhas before they stumbled back to reality and Eddie announced “We’re here!”

“Is this where the party is?” asked one of Zaphod’s heads before one of his arms smacked it.

“Do you know where the nearest hospital is?” Trillian asked Marvin.

“There isn’t one. But there’s an infirmary in the building next door.”

“Great! Let’s go!” Trillian headed for the cargo door but stopped when Marvin made a very annoying, long “Errrrrrrrrrrrr....” Trillian spun around. “What?”

“You should probably be wearing these before you go out.” He shuffled over to a cabinet on the wall just fast enough to make everybody keep waiting for him but slow enough to annoy them while doing it. He opened the cabinet, pulled out four small portable breathing masks and once again slowly shuffled back to the humanoids and handed them out.

“Right. Bad air.” She took hers and fixed it to her face, then fixed one to Arthur’s face. “Open the door, Zaphod.”

Zaphod punched the door button and the cargo hold was immediately flooded with warm, clear, sweet, salty water, sloshing everyone around as it poured in.

Trillian grabbed Arthur and tugged him out of the Heart of Gold, which was parked next to a giant H-shaped building, all of which was under water. Zaphod swam ahead to the airlock doors into the main lobby. Trillian swam behind, pulling Arthur. Marvin was left to pump the water out of the ship, which he dutifully did, complaining about it the entire time.

Once in the lobby, Trillian walked up to the reception desk. Zaphod found a set of insta-dryers and proceeded to turn them all on and run back and forth under them.

“Welcome to the *Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy* corporate headquarters!” said the receptionist. “How may i direct your visit?”

“This is the *Guide*?” asked Trillian, surprised.

“Yes, it is! Have you been here before?”

“Yeah, but.... Why’s it under water?”

“The previous director relocated us in order to hide from someone, i think. It might have had something to do with a lawsuit. We get a lot of those!”

Trillian looked out the lobby windows to the sparkling aqua outside. A few dolphins swam past. She turned back to the receptionist. “Are we on Setasea 4?”

The receptionist glanced around, then lowered her voice. “It’s a secret, but just between you and me? Yes.”

“Ah. Well, i have a friend who needs some medical attention—”

“That one?” asked the receptionist, pointing at Zaphod, who was now lying down trying to be under all of the dryers at once. “We have a lovely on-staff psy-

chiatrist. Shall i buzz him?"

"Er, no, he's, uh.... Well, yes, he probably does need psychological help but not right now. My other friend is just outside in the water. It seemed to be doing him good so i left him there." She pointed past the doors to where Arthur was lolling along the side of the building. The receptionist made a call and soon a couple of nurses came out of one of the elevators and brought Arthur to the infirmary. They directed Trillian and Zaphod to the food and games court and told them they'd call when Arthur was revived.

"Hoopy! Games!" said Zaphod. He trotted over to the arcade while Trillian ordered a warm drink and sat in the atrium, looking out into the surrounding waters. A spaceship plunged into the depths, came to a stop outside the food court, and rolled over, its engines sputtering out. This was followed by another spaceship which did much the same thing. Then another, and another.

Trillian got up and walked over to the gaming area. "Zaphod, honey? I think it's time to get rid of that thing over your head. It's attracting pests." She gestured out the window where various beings were abandoning their ships and trying to cut their way into the building. It certainly seemed as though none of them were smart enough to go down to the lobby and enter through the front doors. Seeing that, that's where Zaphod and Trillian headed to.

"What about monkey man?" asked Zaphod as they descended to the ground floor.

“He’s in good hands,” said Trillian. “He’ll be fine.” They swam over to the Heart of Gold and fired it up. “Eddie? To space, please.”

“Faster done than said!” And the Heart of Gold vanished out of the water, leaving a large air pocket that slammed into itself and burbled to the surface, carrying an array of disappointed tag players sputtering in its wake.



# Chapter 44

Random surfaced and sputtered water out of her mouth. The idiot gelatinous people that she'd hitched a ride with had determined that their target in some crazy game was at the bottom of this crystal blue sea and had plunged their ship into it, causing massive structural failures and a very quick flooding and/or drowning event, which Random wasn't keen on participating in. She looked around and started swimming toward the nearest thing that she could see, which was a ribbon of beach dotted with tropical trees and tiki bars.

Upon pulling herself out of the pleasant sea, she stomped up the pleasant beach and sat angrily down in a pleasant chair beside a pleasant bar. A pleasant-sounding automated waiter bot zipped over to her and she ordered a pleasant tropical drink in a pleasantly surly manner. She pulled everything out of her bag and set it all down on the bar to dry out. She flipped Rutlow's Sub-Etha Sens-O-Matic on, just to make sure it was working. A light came on and she had a temporary warm feeling toward the O Company for making their products waterproof. She flipped it off again, got her drink, and sat back to watch the sunset.

"Hey, waiter!" she called out.

The waiter bot zipped back over. "May i help you?" it chirped.

“Where’s the nearest hotel?”

“The nearest is five tocks away, by humanoid ambulatory methods.”

“Can you call me a taxi?”

“There are none to call.”

“None? Well, where can i spend the night?”

“Most people sleep on the beach. It’s quite safe. Have you a towel?”

“A wet one.”

“There are complimentary towels in the bins at the end of the bar, courtesy of all dolphinkind. Enjoy your stay!” The bot buzzed away and Random sat back again and tried to decide if she liked this planet or not.

Three drinks later, she was leaning towards liking it. She looked out over the calm sea as the colors in the sky turned from reds and purples to deep blues. Dolphins occasionally broke the surface of the water in graceful arcs or just to poke their heads up and smile. A strange animal bobbed along the surface, approaching the beach. As it got closer, Random recognized it as some sort of dog. When it got closer still, she saw that it was Rutlow, dragging a comatose Sputty behind him. Rutlow pulled the man up onto the sand, then hopped on his chest a couple times. Sputty spewed out a jet of water, erupted in a coughing fit, then rolled over and caught his breath. Random caught Rutlow’s attention and the two of them joined her under a string of softly glowing tiki lights.

“Still got my Sens-O-Matic?” asked Rutlow.

Random reluctantly handed it over and Rutlow

tucked it into the mysterious space-defying hiding place under his chin.

“I kinda like this place,” said Sputty, looking around. “Kinda reminds me of the beaches back home.”

“It’s free to sleep on the beach,” said Random. She waved her hand and the waiter bot came over to take drink orders for Sputty and Rutlow.

“So, i take it your pilot crashed, too?” Rutlow asked Random.

“Not so much crashed as flew into an ocean. Idiots. Ever figure out what they’re chasing?”

“Said it was someone with valuable bones. Must be worth a lot to have a whole fleet of galactomorons after you.”

“Here’s to valuable bones,” said Random, tipping her glass.

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Libby tipped her head to the couple who had dropped her off on a ribbon of beach. She smiled politely but didn’t like the way that they leered at her with all of their many eyes. But at least these beings didn’t fly their spaceship straight into the ocean like many of the other crafts around them. She turned around and felt lucky to be out of that creepy situation but a little bit flustered by being separated from her friends on an unknown planet. At least the air was warm and sweet and the scenery calming and beautiful. She walked away from the landing pads stretched like stepping

stones along the darkening beach and aimed toward a string of lights in the distance.

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Eck O'Chambre was not convinced. He stood with his hand next to a button, deciding whether to push it or not. If he pushed it, the annoying person in front of him would be transported out of his spaceship. If he didn't push it, he'd have to listen to the annoying person annoyingly explain why the button should not be pushed. Right now, the only thing that was giving him pause was that the action of pushing the button and sending this person off of his spaceship would most likely kill this person, which may or may not be a bad thing, considering how annoying he was being.

“So *that*,” insisted Ford, bouncing slightly in an annoying way, “is why transporting me out of here is a very bad idea. And believe me, i *know* very bad ideas. Can i interest you in one? I've got some around here somewhere....” He started patting all of his pockets and looking concerned. Eck moved his hand closer toward the button. “Wait!” yelled Ford, nearly making Eck slam his palm down on the button. “A compromise! Just send me down to the planet! Easy as cheese! I'm gone, you're happy! I think, anyway. Are you happy? Happiness is great, isn't it? I'll bet i've got some happiness around here too....”

Eck garumphed, decided for no reason not to kill Ford, adjusted the settings, and slammed his hand on

the button. Ford vuurped out of the air.

At about that same time, or perhaps slightly after that, Ford vroomped into some different air, which relieved Ford an awful lot, since air was something that he felt he had a good relationship with and being without it sometimes made him dead or hungover, depending on where he was and how much air there wasn't. In this case, the air was very much there.

Ford, being an experienced galactic hitchhiker and dashingy comfortable with the whole matter-to-energy-back-to-matter process of teleportation, felt quite at ease and not at all surprised to find himself on a smooth plain on a warm planet on a dark night. In the milliseconds that Ford had available to him before gravity took hold, he was able to ascertain all of these things and he existed, if ever so briefly, in a relaxed, almost happy, and not at all surprised state. When gravity decided to act upon the new resident of this planet however, Ford very quickly discovered that what he was standing on was not, as he'd quickly surmised, a flat plain but was in fact, much to Ford's sudden surprise, a flat surface of water. As most bipedal carbon-based humanoids did not do well when attempting to stand on top of deep water (with a few notable apocryphal exceptions), there was a definitive plunging of said humanoid into said water.

Ford, being the hoopy frood that he generally was, did manage to get out "Belgiumbblblble..." before sputtering back to the surface and adding to that initial outburst a string of more interesting and thoughtful

words that would make a Gnaxpian grandmother blush. He thrashed around and cursed some more, then settled down into a wet funk and tried to decide if he would swim for shore or just float there until someone came along. Ford being Ford, and not terribly into exertion if he didn't have a reason for it, opted for the latter. It was a warm night, the stars were twinkling—he could relax for a bit in the gently swelling water. Maybe he'd take a nap.

# Chapter 45

“Wake up!” said the nurse.

Arthur slowly opened his eyes and took in his surroundings. He was in what looked like a hospital. He was very warm. There was a woman there smiling at him. It wasn't Fenchurch. It was someone he didn't know. He felt wet, and, feeling this, felt embarrassed. As his brain came back to life, he realized that he was lying in a tub of warm water, with just his face above the surface. It was very calm and soothing and he felt like going back to sleep, but then he started to think. This hurt a bit, but he kept at it. “Where am i?” he asked.

“You're at the headquarters of the *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*,” said the nurse.

“How did i get here?”

“Your friends brought you here.”

“Which friends?”

“A very direct woman who seemed to be in charge, and an overgrown man-child with three arms and two heads.”

“Zaphod?” said Arthur. He sat up, splashing the warm water about. “Hey, why am i normal-sized?” The nurse looked confused. This was a question that the nurse was not trained to answer. It was not a question that she'd ever heard anyone say before. It was not a

question that any sane person should ever have to ask. She smiled nervously and backed out of the room, locking it behind her.

Arthur, now nearly back to his full, if limited, brain capacity, looked around the room. It was white, clean, sterile, but with a few happy motivational posters on the wall with sayings like “It’s Possible,” “Try Harder,” and “Maybe Not This Time.” Out the window it looked like... well, it looked like Arthur was under water. He saw a dolphin swim by. The dolphin noticed Arthur and spun in a lazy roll, waving a flipper at him. Arthur meekly waved back.

Then there was some sort of commotion in the water. What looked like a spaceship plunged down past the window, then another one. After a moment, some people swam by in the other direction, toward the surface. It was all very odd. He decided to try and not think about everything and be happy that he appeared to be quite alive and quite normal-sized, which was something, thought Arthur, that he absolutely ought to be happy about.

---

Arthur awoke again. Some time had passed, as the water outside was now dark and murky. He felt well and was about to try to climb out of the water bath that he was in when another nurse arrived in the room. She greeted him warmly and proceeded to prod him in various places, test his joints, and run humming scan-



ners over his body. When she was done, she told him that he was well enough to be discharged. She handed him his clothes, which appeared to have been washed, then told him to check in at the desk before leaving.

Arthur dressed, trying to remember why he'd been wearing shorts and not pants, and went outside the room. An ancient-looking grizzled man in a clean uniform was sitting behind a desk in the wide hallway. Arthur walked up to him. "Er, excuse me, i was told to check in with you before i left."

"Name?" said the old man, barely opening his eyes.

"Arthur Dent."

The old man's eyes popped open and he became much more animated, moving quickly in ways that an old man ought not to be able to. "Ah, Mr. Dent! Excellent. Please fill this out and then you'll need to see Cthulakkenstein in Employee Management." He handed Arthur a piece of paper which seemed to be a release of liability form. The type on it was so small that, even squinting, Arthur couldn't read a word of it. He signed it and the old man directed him to the right room on the right level in the right wing of the building.

A few ticks later, Arthur pushed open a door and was greeted by a friendly womanish-sort of being. "Good morning! Are you here for the experiments?"

"The what? No, i was told to speak to, uh, Thuleaken..."

"Cthulakkenstein?" asked the being brightly. "I'll let them know you're here. Your name?"

"Arthur Dent."

“Oh! Mr. Dent! Great to finally meet you! My name’s Gorvine. I can get your paperwork started.” She bustled around and in a moment handed Arthur a sheaf of forms. “I’ll let Cthulakkenstein know you’re here.”

Arthur glanced at the forms. “Er, excuse me? These look like employment forms. I’m not here to apply for a job.”

Gorvine laughed. “Oh, Mr. Dent, you’re such a kidder! You already *have* the job. We just need to get you in the system—you know, so you can get paid and all.”

“Paid?” said Arthur, as Gorvine hurried away. Arthur flipped through the forms again, then shook his head, sat down, and started filling out what he could. He had no permanent address, no bank accounts, no next-of-kin, so there was an awful lot of the forms that he left blank. When he was done, he handed them back to Gorvine and she led him to an inner office. A very wide, multi-armed lump of a thing stood up from behind a desk when Arthur walked in. At least, Arthur assumed it stood up. Arthur couldn’t see if the thing had legs or not but it did rise up a bit.

“Mr. Dent!” said the thing. It waved an arm or two at the chair in front of the desk. “Have a seat. I’m the Horrible Cthulakkenstein. A pleasure to meet you!”

“Horrible?” echoed Arthur.

“It’s just a title. Now, you’ll need to do your onboarding with the company. Here is your employee pass—you’ll use that for access to the executive gym and washrooms. Here’s a folder of information on the

employee retirement plan. This one's all about health maintenance. And this is the company policy manual. Also, here's a nice mug with our logo on it, and a tote bag to hold everything!" It handed all of these things to Arthur. "Do you have any questions?"

"Yes. What exactly is my job?"

Both Cthulakkenstein and Gorvine, who was still standing in the doorway, laughed heartily. "Oh, Mr. Dent! You are too much! Gorvine will show you to the onboarding terminals where you can go through the various learning sessions required. Again, happy to meet you and welcome aboard!"

It ushered Arthur out and Gorvine led him to a room with a single chair with a large screen in front of it. "The program will let you know when you're done," she said. "Enjoy!"

She closed the door and Arthur thought that he heard it being locked. He looked around the room—it was empty except for the chair and the screen. He sat down and looked at the mug he'd been given. It had a friendly face on it with the words "Don't Panic!" He didn't have time to contemplate this any further because the screen in front of him lit up and he was launched into a seemingly unending presentation on working, living, playing, and possibly dying as an employee of the *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*.

# Chapter 46

Trillian's head unexploded itself and her limbs turned back into human limbs from the crayonish drawings that they'd become. She shook her head to clear it and looked out at... what was she looking at? "Eddie?"

"Hey! How's everything!"

"Where are we?"

"Space!"

Trillian looked out the windows. The Heart of Gold appeared to be sitting between two enormous pinkish-yellowish blobs of something. There were occasional sparks passing back and forth between the blobs, buffeting the ship every time one occurred. Beyond the two closest blobs were more blobs and a lot of gray goo and lots of sparks. What there *wasn't* was a void of nothingness with a zillion stars in the background, which was generally what came to mind when someone mentioned space. "This doesn't look like space."

"It's a space."

"Eddie..." said Trillian in her most aggravated mom voice.

"Well, you probably should have been more specific as to *what* space you wanted to go to. I calculated the trip to the nearest space."

"And where exactly is this nearest space?" asked Zaphod, one head of whom was staring out the win-

dow, the other head of whom seemed to be looking for something to drink.

“Er... do you know what a synapse is?”

“Maybe,” said half of Zaphod.

“No,” said the other half.

“Yes,” said Trillian, glaring at Zaphod. “It’s the space between two nerve cells—wait! Are we microscopic?”

“Everything’s microscopic if you’re big enough,” protested Eddie.

“Eddie!” said Trillian, glaring at the general environs of the control panel of the ship, since Eddie didn’t have a face that Trillian could glare at. “Get us out of here!”

“To space!” said Zaphod.

“Actual space!” clarified Trillian. “The space between planets and stars. The space that we humans call space. Not the space needle or the space after a period or the space between the lines. *Space* space. Got it?”

“That might require some calculations.”

“Well get on that.”

“Hey computer man,” called out Zaphod, “where exactly are we? Are we, like, inside someone?”

“More of a something i would say, although sensors are not indicating exactly what.”

“Leave him alone, Zaphod. The sooner he calculates, the sooner we’re out of here.”

“Just wanna know where we are is all,” said Zaphod.

“Mollusk, most likely,” came a low voice from the back of the room.

Trillian turned. “What did you say Marvin?”

“Oh, just based on the physiology of the neurons about us, i calculate that we’re in a mollusk of some type. Did i mention that being this small has made all of my circuits incredibly painful? Thought i should mention that. Not that anyone cares.... I don’t suppose the firing neurons disrupt *your* circuitry, do they?”

“Somebody shut that metal-mouth up,” grumbled Zaphod. “He’s bumming me right out.”

---

Me was a hexapus, living its life in among the corals and seaweeds of one of the many cerulean seas on the planet Setasea 4. Me had a happy life, oozing itself around the sea floor, eating little bits of things, changing color to hide from predators—generally living the care-free life of a hexapus. Me called itself Me because its brain was not sufficiently evolved to arrive at the state of evolution where everything needs names. Me was Me, everyone else was You. Me ate Yous, hid from other Yous, occasionally entwined itself with another You, and that kept Me alive and well.

One day (or week or minute or lifetime—Me didn’t pay much attention to time) a very large shiny thing appeared near Me’s home. Me wiggled over to it, curious about this big smooth thing that didn’t act like a fish or a shark or a seaweed or any of the other Yous

that Me knew about. Me touched it with one of Me's six tentacles—the one that Me reserved for touching new things. It did not feel like any other You. Me tried to eat a tiny bit of it, but this great big You could not be eaten, even with Me's sharp tooth. Me spent a long time floating around this big You, wondering what part it played in the ecosystem of Me on the sea floor. Would it be here forever? How long was forever? Is that lunch? Me was easily distracted.

An hour or a tick or seven lifetimes later, Me was just below the great belly of this monstrous You when, in a cataclysm of bubbles, the You disappeared. Me was swirled around, carried up to the surface, then slowly settled all the way back down to the sea floor where there was coral and seaweed and no big shiny You. Perhaps it had never been there at all. Me slithered itself back toward the rock where Me liked to sleep but Me felt different somehow. Something seemed to be making noises in Me's brain. Every time Me thought about moving the tip of Me's fourth tentacle—the one which Me liked to use to grab things—Me heard a distinctly metallic voice say “ow.”

Wiggle. “Ow.” Wiggle “Ow.” Wiggle “Ow.” This made Me happy.

# Chapter 47

It was a beautiful day on Setasea 4 but Fenchurch couldn't see it. She'd been sitting in the co-pilot's chair on the bridge of Fondrew's small runabout. Fondrew had made a few stops and Fenchurch had sat there. He flew to the Setasea system and Fenchurch had sat there. Now he was landing the craft on a small platform in the middle of an undulating sea—little isthmuses of land spread around on the fringes joining little dots of land in among strips of land, intertwining in a network as far as the eye could see, the places for land-dwellers to visit in a world of sea-dwellers. But Fenchurch didn't see the beauty in it. She didn't take in the sunshine and colors and tropical paradiseness of the place. She sat and stared blankly out the window as the world passed by.

The ship landed, then the platform sank into a tube, descending below the surface of the water. Fenchurch watched the smooth walls go by, but didn't register them.

"So," said Fondrew nervously. "We're at the Guide headquarters again. I'll be inside for a while. I suggest that you not stay in the ship." He paused. Fenchurch didn't respond. "Well, there's a cafeteria with food, if you need it. And, i don't know, i suppose if you're looking for purpose, or at least something to occupy your



time, we could offer you a job. It might take your mind off of... well....” He stepped out of the craft. “Employee Management is on level three. I’ll tell them you’re coming.”

Fondrew left and Fenchurch sat for a while more. Eventually, after some time had passed—she wasn’t sure how long; a minute? An hour? A lifetime?—she got up and left the spaceship as well. She found the cafeteria and ate, but she didn’t enjoy it. She went to Employee Management and they gave her a job. She went to her desk and met her co-workers and she sat down and she began to learn her new job, having no idea what it entailed.

---

Fondrew walked into his office and greeted his assistant. “Hello, Miss Glip!”

“Oh! Mr. Fondrew! Nice to see you again!” Fondrew waved cheerily and headed toward his inner office doors. “Oh, the director isn’t in right now, would you like to sit and wait?”

Fondrew spun around. “Miss Glip, *i* am the director. Had you forgotten that?”

“You were the director, yes, *i* knew that. But the current director is Mr. Dent. He’s not in right now, would you like to wait?”

“Ah, *i* see the confusion. Yes, that was a temporary reassignment of roles. As *i*’m sure you were aware, Mr. Dent was sucked into a black hole very recently, and

the stipulations of the emergency powers contract explicitly state that, on the demise of the temporary director, the permanent director”—he paused and touched himself not at all humbly—“me, should immediately resume his duties.”

“Sucked into a black hole?”

“Yes, quite tragic. Well, business must go on.” He continued to the door and waved his employee pass in front of it. Nothing happened. He waved it again. Still nothing happened. He turned around. “Miss Glip? My pass appears to not be working.”

“Yes, sir, Mr. Fondrew sir, it’s still keyed to Mr. Dent. But you say he’s dead?” Fondrew nodded. “When did this happen?”

Fondrew became annoyed. “Within thirty tocks i suppose, what does it matter? He’s gone, i’m here. May i please have access to my office?” Miss Glip fidgeted uncomfortably. He glared at her. “Is there a problem?”

“Well, it’s just that Mr. Dent is down in Employee Management right now finishing up his onboarding training. I was told that he’d be arriving at his office soon. It will be nice to meet him!”

Fondrew stared at Miss Glip. “Dent?” She nodded. “Arthur Dent?” She nodded again. “Arthur Dent the barely evolved simian from Earth, *that* Arthur Dent?”

“I think so.”

Fondrew stormed out of the office to a cacophony of *pings* as every elevator arrived to take him to Employee Management.

Far below him, in a locked room in front of a bright screen, Arthur Dent was slowly going mad. He was being presented with banal commonsense information that any idiot should know from pre-school in a very slow and thorough manner by chipper happy people who would stop every minute or so to “check for understanding” by repeating what they’d just said, only slower. In between every module of droning information was an inspiring video of motivated and accomplished employees doing their jobs the way absolutely nobody ever does their jobs, ever, all set to soaring, impactful music and bold graphics of words like “strive” and “achieve” and, for some reason that made no sense to Arthur “toast.”

Arthur had, at one point, stood up and pounded on the door but he discovered that there was a sensor somewhere that knew if he was watching or not and when he stopped watching, the module that he was in the middle of would start over from the beginning. After a couple times of watching the same horrible graphics over and over, he gave up and sat catatonically in the chair, barely registering the things in front of him but being slightly aware that anything in these presentations was likely to show up in his dreams, and not in a good way.

He was somewhere along the way through a module on “sentient airborne pathogens” (there was no progress bar or time indicator on anything so he was

unsure if he was more than halfway finished or still had hours to go) when the door suddenly burst open and Fondrew stood there, looking at Arthur with what he could only interpret as rage. Actually, having seen nothing but engagingly happy people for he-didn't-know-how-long, almost any other expression from casual indifference to confused shock would have seemed to Arthur like rage in comparison, but in this case, it was pretty close to accurate.

“What are you doing here?” blasted out Fondrew.

“I’ve been asking myself that for quite a while.”

“I mean, why are you alive? *How* are you alive? How did you get here?”

“Er, well, first of all, i’m not really sure exactly where i am, other than it has something to do with the *Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy*. Second of all, i have no idea how i got here. I was on a planet, then a spaceship with some odd people, then i had the strangest dream that i was somehow a giant, but it felt so real... And then i woke up in an infirmary here and was told that i have a job. Does that make sense?”

“Of course it does! But you were sucked into a black hole!”

“I was?”

“Don’t play ignorant with me! I know your kind. You walk around pretending that you’re barely evolved—hah! I’ve dealt with species like you for longer than you’ve been alive! Tell me how you did it! How did you escape the black hole?”

“Er... magic?”

“Fondrew snorted. “Don’t get comfortable, Dent. I’ll have legal look at this. You won’t win.” He sneered menacingly, but to a human, when an odd gangly person with a suction-like protuberance on his head and doubly-jointed arms sneers threateningly, it’s a bit hard to take it seriously. Fondrew stalked away and Arthur, seeing the opportunity for his liberation, lunged at the door and caught it before it swung shut. He left the video calling out “please sit to continue” on repeat and made his way to the front desk of Employee Management. Once there, he asked Gorvine where his office was, and she directed him to the bank of elevators.

---

At the same time that Arthur was escaping the Employee Management Department, Fenchurch was escaping to a happier place—her memories. She was in another locked room, letting the excited people on the screen in front of her excitedly tell her how excited they were to work at an exciting company like the *Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy*. She found it far less exciting than they did, and so sat in a dreamlike state, letting the blandness of the videos wash over her as she thought about Earth, Golgafrincham, and Arthur.

As she was doing that, Fondrew stalked purposefully and somewhat ragefully into the legal department and was told that he had to fill out some forms before seeing the receptionist and despite his arguing and yelling, the helpful robot blocking his path continued to

block his path until he sullenly sat down to fill out the forms.

As he was doing that, Arthur stepped into the director's office of the Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy.

"You must be Mr. Dent!" said Miss Glip. "Welcome to your office! It's so nice to finally meet you!"

"Finally?" questioned Arthur, still in a bit of a daze.

"Well, you have been director for a while now. We were all wondering if you ever planned to show up to work! But i'm happy that you finally have!"

"Director?" asked Arthur.

"Is that title not suitable for you? You can pick another, if you'd like. Shall i call you the Horrible Arthur Dent?"

"Er, no. Arthur will be fine. You say i'm the director?" Miss Glip nodded. "And this is my office?"

"This is the outer office, your personal office is through those doors. Your employee pass will open them."

Arthur walked up to the doors and held his pass out. There was a soft click and one of the doors swung open. He stepped in and looked around. Shelves with books and knickknacks, fine art on the walls, a fabulous dark wood desk, and a large window with a view of dolphins cavorting in the sun-dappled sea—it was the finest office he'd ever seen. It was also an office that he'd seen before. He'd been here, with Ford and Fondrew and a little impatient talking mouse. That was just before they went to rescue Fenchurch. At that thought, he suddenly realized that Fenchurch—at least

in his dream—had been with Fondrew. Maybe he knew where she was! Did she think he was dead? Had he really been sucked into a black hole? Was this some sort of alternate parallel-universe reality that he'd slipped into where he was the director of the *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*? Was Fenchurch in this reality too and was she the same Fenchurch from his reality? All this thinking made Arthur's head hurt. He turned around. "Excuse me, what is your name?"

"I'm Miss Glip. I'm your personal assistant. Would you like to see what's on your schedule today?"

"Ah. No, thank you. Do you think you could find the, uh, person named Fondrew?"

"I'll have him paged. Should i have him report here?"

"Yes, thank you." Arthur turned back around and went into the office, which was apparently *his* office. He studied the decor and the walls and looked out the window for a while, then sat at the desk. There was nothing on it, but it was big and heavy and impressively dark and woody. Arthur almost felt important, but he also felt quite at a loss as to what to do. What do directors of large corporations actually do? Make decisions? Hire people? Fire people? He finally decided to sit and think and if something came up where he had to make a decision, he'd do the best he could.

# Chapter 48

Eatapip was having a lovely day. The evening before, she'd been cautiously trying to enjoy her self-imposed holiday and was feeling slightly uncomfortable about it, but then as the evening wore on, an enchanting woman with an equally enchanting accent had arrived at the beach-side café where Eata was sipping a fruity drink and they had struck up a conversation and the evening had turned to night and the night to day and they had talked and talked and were now curled up next to each other on the beach, watching the waves gently lapping the shore. It was amazing to Eata that a day before, she had been single and happy, if slightly lonely, and here she was, falling in love with someone that she'd just met. It didn't seem real, but it felt so incredibly comfortable that there couldn't be anywhere else that she was meant to be right now. It was an odd feeling to not be looking for something and totally unaware that the thing you weren't looking for was actually what you deeply wanted and needed and then to have it dropped in front of you with no warning as to how it would suddenly and completely change your life. But even thoughts like that—about her life changing and being different from now until a hoped-for forever, seemed both unexpected and perfectly natural. It was as if the universe has just turned a little



bit and in that turning, two people who weren't looking for each other and didn't even know that they wanted each other found each other.

Sometimes the turning of the universe can do great things, if even for small insignificant people swept along in a cosmic eddy on a beach on a planet in a galaxy among billions of stars.

# Chapter 49

Ford was deposited on the beach by a friendly dolphin who'd found him floating and singing out of tune. The dolphin had happily given Ford a ride to shore and Ford thought that it was because the dolphins of Setasea 4 were helpful and friendly but it was really because none of them wanted to hear Ford's singing anymore. "May the tides carry you home!" called out Ford to the departing dolphin. The dolphin flipped its tail in what Ford assumed was a wave but was actually a very rude gesture and Ford spun around to determine where he was. Pleasant ocean, check. Warm sandy beach, check. Tiki bar, check. That right there might have been the end of Ford's checklist except for a fourth thing. Row of unattended parked spaceships, check. Ford bounced up and down for a moment, weighing alternatives. Steal a ship? Have a drink? Steal a ship? Have a drink? Why not both? He ran over to the bar, ordered a pan-galactic gargle-blaster, slammed it down, fell on his face, popped back up again, dusted himself off, then ran to the row of spaceships.

They were a rather pedestrian bunch of ships—suitable for family trips to the outer reaches or a hop to Altair for shopping. Nothing caught Ford's eye as something he really *wanted* to steal, just the run-of-the-mill stuff that he'd steal merely for the convenience of it. He

kept walking along the row, keeping a mental list of the ones that were the least offensive, until he got to the end, where the landing pads gave way to a skinny strip of beach which ran off to the next little islet in the distance. He was about to turn back to hotwire a lumpy gray number when something caught his eye. Sunlight had glinted off a few more ships in the distance on another landing area, and that had attracted his gaze, but what got his heart pumping was the one that the sun did *not* glint off of—a sexy black number parked among the gaudy designer colors. He eyed it from afar and marvelled at how it just sat there, being unobtrusive and dark and cool. That was the one. He set off on a roundabout network of isthmuses to reach his goal.

---

Arthur heard a commotion in the outer office—it sounded like yelling. Normally, when Arthur heard yelling, his first inclination was to go someplace where there wasn't any yelling and leave the yelling people to yell about their problems by themselves, without bringing him into it. But he, apparently, was the director of this company now so he felt that he probably ought to step out of his office and discover what all the yelling was about. He didn't really *want* to do this of course, but he had nothing else to do and nowhere to go that would get him away from the yelling, so he opened the door of his inner office and stepped out to the outer office.

“There!” yelled Fondrew, pointing at Arthur. “That’s the one! He was dead! He can prove it!”

Fondrew looked crazily at Arthur. Beside him was a woman with some folders who looked very much like she didn’t want to be there. Miss Glip stood between Arthur and the two guests, attempting to keep them away from him.

“He doesn’t look very dead to me,” said the woman flatly.

“That’s not the point!” argued Fondrew. “It doesn’t matter whether or not he’s dead *now*. He *was* dead, and that’s what counts! The contract says ‘in the event of the incapacitation or death of the aforementioned’—he gestured at Arthur—“the directorship shall revert to the previous director.” He gestured at himself.

The woman next to him flipped open one of the folders and scanned some of the papers in it. She looked at Arthur carefully. “Are you dead?”

“Uh, no?”

“She turned to Fondrew. “He’s not dead.”

“But he *was*! It doesn’t matter how long he was dead or if he came back to life! If he died, than that provision”—he tapped her sheaf of papers rapidly—“goes into effect!”

The woman turned back to Arthur. “Have you recently died?”

“Er, not that i know of. Unless this is a different reality and i’m actually dead in a previous one.”

The woman looked around the room. “Is this a different reality?”

Fondrew shuddered in frustration. “No! This is this reality, *the* reality! The only real reality! Everything in here is real and we’re all real people and we’re all alive and no one is dead, but he *was* dead because he fell into a black hole and if you fall into a black hole, you’re dead!”

“Then how is he standing here?” asked the woman.

Fondrew paused, and his anger subsided. He looked thoughtful for a second. “Good question. Arthur, why aren’t you dead? I saw you disappear across the event horizon of a black hole. No one survives that. It’s impossible.”

“Impossible?”

“Completely one hundred percent impossible.”

“Not even a little itty bitty speck of a chance of surviving, no matter how improbable? Because i seem to remember being in similar situations where death seemed certain, only to somehow, on the slimmest bit of improbability, survive. Maybe the universe likes me or something.”

“Why would the universe like *you*?”

“I don’t know. I think i’m likeable enough.”

“The universe doesn’t care for anybody! It’s a cold empty unfeeling void with little specks of humanity running around thinking that they’re important. Why if you—” Fondrew stopped. Everyone stood still, waiting for whatever he was going to say, but he didn’t say anything. Then he smiled. “The Heart of Gold!”

“The Heart of Gold?” echoed Arthur. “You mean that strange spaceship that Zaphod had?”

“Yes! The Heart of Gold runs on an infinite improbability drive! You’re right! There *is* a tiny chance that you could survive a black hole. A sliver of a chance. A chance so microscopic that it would never happen unless there was an improbability field of immense measure—and there’s only one thing in the galaxy that can do that, the Heart of Gold!”

“Oh. Well, i’ve no idea where it is, if that’s what you’re asking me.”

“Why would i ask you? You’re insignificant, Arthur Dent. You were a convenient pawn and i’ve no use for you anymore. But that ship, that ship.... It must be back from its dereliction. It must have been found....” Fondrew stood mumbling, wrapped up in his thoughts.

“So,” said the woman with the folders of documents. “I’m going to assume that this means that Arthur Dent did *not* die?”

“What?” said Fondrew, startled that this woman was still there. “Yes, fine, whatever. Not important. I’ve got bigger plans now....” He walked out of the room muttering “Heart of Gold, Heart of Gold....”

The woman from the Legal Department watched him leave, shrugged, and organized her papers. “Seeing as how you’re not dead and weren’t dead and are currently alive, i’m going to go file this and let you carry on being the director.” She walked out of the room.

Arthur turned to Miss Glip. “What if i don’t want to be the director?”

She laughed. “Oh, you’ll get used to it. It’s a very easy job!”

# Chapter 50

“C’mon, man, you’re the computer!” grumbled Zaphod to Eddie. “This is supposed to be easy for you!”

“Oh, sure! Easy! If you want to end up in the middle of a star or spread three molecules thick around a solar system, sure! *That’s* easy. I can do that if you want! Should i do that?”

“No,” said Trillian. “Just keep going with the calculations, We’d prefer to be somewhere that won’t instantly kill us and relatively close to our actual sizes.”

“I wouldn’t mind being a bit bigger,” said Zaphod. “Sounds like fun!”

“If it’d make your ego smaller, i’d accept that,” smirked Trillian.

Both of Zaphod’s heads gave Trillian a pouty look. “Oh, you’re no fun. Ford would’ve gone along with it.”

“Well Ford isn’t here. When’s the last time you saw him, anyway?”

“StellarFest. We were trying not to be killed.”

“Seems like you two do that a lot.”

“Yeah, we do, don’t we?” He smiled from both heads and thought about good times with his best pal. “I wonder where Ford is right now?”

Ford was, right then, attempting to gain access to a very stubborn spaceship. There were lots of spacecraft manufacturers in the galaxy and Ford was pretty familiar with most of them, but every once in a while there was a spaceship that wasn't built the same way as others were built. Many of these custom jobs used off-the-shelf components for a lot of their systems though, so even if Ford didn't recognize the brand of the spaceship, he most likely was familiar with the circuitry that held the doors closed. But then every once in a great while, there was that odd spaceship that was completely custom-built, down to the servo motors that controlled the laser-guided doorbells. This was one of those ships.

Ford had walked around it a few times and the only thing he'd managed to get access to was the waste-ejection port, which wasn't something that anyone would really want access to anyway. He did find a registration plate that listed the serial number, engine class and various other technical specifications, and at the top of this was printed ECTOS, which he assumed was the name of the manufacturer—a manufacturer that he'd never heard of. This was a puzzle, and Ford was keen to figure it out, but he also admired the design and color of this ship so had a certain compunction to not gain access to it by simple brute-force methods like bashing the door in. Of course, bashing the door in would make the ship un-spaceworthy, so that would be an absolute last resort.

After another few trips around the craft, he decid-



ed that his best bet would be to get up on top of it and try to hotwire the docking hatch. This would require either a ladder or a catapult of some sort. He set off down the beach toward the nearest tiki bar to see what kinds of ladders or catapulting supplies each one might have.

The first tiki bar had no ladders, or, in fact, anything at all to climb on except for a couple stools. The thought of building a tower out of stools occurred to Ford, but then he realized that that would require actual effort, so he scrapped it. He went on to the second tiki bar, then the third, and the fourth, all of which were blatantly void of ladders. As he was coming around from the back of the fourth tiki bar, having once again found nothing useful, he decided to take a break from all of this hard work and have a drink. He'd done the same thing at the other three bars. He plopped himself down on a stool and mulled over what to order when a voice behind him said "i recommend the Jinniant On Ix." Ford thought that that sounded good and spun around to thank the person.

"Or the fruitier Genie Anton Eeks," said Random, sitting down next to him.

"Random!" said Ford with a slightly buzzed delight. "Where's everyone else?"

Random pointed to two lounge chairs by the beach. "There's Sputty and Rutlow. No idea where anyone else is. Last time i saw my dad, he was the size of a planet."

"Yeah, that was weird. Wonder if he got out of that?"

“Knowing my dad, he probably did by accident. The universe seems to like him for some reason—some reason that nobody’s ever really been able to explain. What’re you doing here?”

“Trying to steal a spaceship.”

“Trying to?”

“Bit of a tough nut to crack—totally custom.”

“Need some help?”

Ford gave Random a quick appraisal, then finished his drink on one gulp. “Sure!” He decided that he liked her in kind of the same way that he liked Arthur—always a good person to have around when a mild crime is about to be committed, although in Random’s case, she could probably help out in the actual criming more than Arthur, who was generally the decoy, or the lookout, or the victim.

“You wanna come along?” Random asked Sputty and Rutlow as she gathered her things.

“Nah, i’m digging this vibe here,” said Sputty. “Think i’m gonna stay a bit.”

“I’m with him,” said Rutlow, settling down for a snooze.

“Suit yourselves,” said Random. “Always a spot on the Grey if you want it.” Sputty nodded and leaned back in his lounge chair, soaking up the sun.

“The Grey?” asked Ford as they headed toward the strings of landing platforms.

“My ship,” said Random.

“You have a ship?”

“Had. Lost it somewhere, although i think i know

where. I'll help you steal this ship if you give me a lift to mine."

"Deal." They walked along the sunlit beach next to the sun-dappled sea in search of a spaceship that didn't care if the sun hit it or not.

# Chapter 51

Fenchurch sat at the desk that she'd been assigned to and looked out the window at a small pod of dolphins swimming by. They looked so peaceful and free of worry and she wondered what it would be like to live like they did. She sat in this reverie for a while, then got around to doing her new job, which consisted of looking up words in the *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* and cross-referencing them to any other mentions of the same words. The word she was given to start with was "whoa." She did a search and came up with a long list, all of which needed to be linked to each other and none of which looked like they were related to each other in any way, as "whoa" was generally used as an interjection and could appear in any sort of listing, from "The Best Place to Eat Pureed Slumpfish" to "How to Avoid a Civil Litigation in Curmoolabub 8" and even a few times in "Death Throes of Somnambulent Fairy Cakes." She looked over at her neighbor, another cross-referencer in the next cubicle.

"Is this what we do all day?" she asked.

"Pretty much," said the woman next to her. "It's very important, as the *Guide* is constantly being updated, and everything has to stay current. I like to think that i'm a part of a really great thing!" She smiled, evidently contented with her job.

Fenchurch smiled weakly back, then turned to the task at hand. She scrolled down the list but didn't start cross-referencing anything. Is this really what she wanted to do? Would this help her get over the loss of Arthur? She dawdled a bit more before deciding that she needed a break, even though she hadn't done any work yet. The hours of onboarding had been somewhat draining and she felt that that mind-numbing experience justified some time to recover. She asked her neighbor where she could go to get some fresh air and was directed to the top of the building.

After a quiet ride up, save for a cordial chat with the elevator, Fenchurch arrived at the top of the Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy building, which was now encased in a giant clear dome, with a few shafts ascending to the surface of the water above them. She looked about, but didn't feel that this was the "fresh air" that she was looking for. She was about to try to find someone to ask about riding one of the landing platforms up to sea level when she spied a familiar door. She walked over to it and a security camera swiveled onto her. She tapped the "down" button and a nasally voice said "access code, please."

"I don't have one," said Fenchurch, "but i was hoping that you might remember me."

The security camera zoomed in on her and scanned up and down, then popped a laser gun out of a panel just for insurance. "I remember you. You got me into a fight with that cocky spaceship hangar door!" Another laser gun swiveled into view.

“That wasn’t me, that was Ford. I was totally on your side.” She looked across the flat expanse of roof to see that there was no spaceship hangar on it anymore. “Besides, that door’s gone. You won!”

“Hm. Yes, so i did. You still need an access code.”

“No i don’t. I didn’t have one before and i ended up on this side of you. So, logically, since i didn’t have one before, and you mistakenly let me through, you should fix your mistake now and put me back on the other side of you.”

There were some whirrs and clicks. “But...”

“You wouldn’t want me to have to report myself to maintenance, would you? I mean, i can handle their reprogramming, but i wouldn’t want the guilt of having them come to ‘repair’ you. I’m sure that they wouldn’t shut you down *permanently*, would they?”

More buzzes and clicks. “You... i... access... computing... they... you...” Fenchurch waited until there was a *ding!* and the elevator door slid open. She stepped into it as the door security robot spit out a halting list of pronouns.

Once inside the elevator, she scanned the panel and selected the button that she hoped was the right one. After a short descent, she was let out into a small low-ceiling corridor, at the end of which was a lever in the wall. She crouch-walked over to it, glanced upward, then pulled it down.

Arthur sat at his desk, wondering what to do. The life of a director, so far, seemed pretty dull. His thoughts were interrupted by his assistant's voice coming from somewhere around the desk.

“Mr. Dent, sir?”

Arthur looked around, trying to find the source of the communication. “Yes?” he answered.

“Someone named Barnexa here to see you. Should i send her in?”

“Er, yes, thank you.”

Arthur thought that that name was familiar and his suspicion was confirmed when the door clicked open and a familiar tall, muscular figure with large white hands stepped into the office. “Sorry to bother you, director, but there's been an escape from—” She froze and stared at Arthur. “You're not Fondrew.”

“Er, no.”

“Where's Fondrew?”

“Somewhere in the building, i think. Although, possibly not.”

“Why are you at his desk?”

“Well, apparently it's my desk now. I seem to be the director.”

“Ah.” Barnexa studied Arthur for a moment. “You're one of the Earthlings!”

“I suppose i am, yes.”

“Well, we've got to get you back to the preserve!”

“Actually, i'd rather not, if that's all right.”

“What? Why not? Don't you want to be preserved?”

“Well, personally, i suppose that would be nice, and

i appreciate all the trouble, but not if it means being in a zoo.”

“It’s not a zoo, its a preserve! Our mission is to prevent the extinction of galactic species. Your species is critically endangered! We must protect it!”

“Yes, well, that’s a noble mission and all, but it’s just that, well, we all felt rather trapped there.”

“Of course you were trapped there! How else could we preserve you?”

“Well, couldn’t there be some provision for, say, taking a vacation every once in a while?”

“Whatever would you need a vacation for? Your life *was* a vacation! It was a paradise! All your needs were met! Why would you ever want to escape?”

“That’s the thing, you see, our species doesn’t take well to a life without struggle.”

“You mean, like, war?”

“Not necessarily war, but something to give us purpose. Something to strive for. Some metaphorical mountain to climb.”

“We could add a mountain.”

Arthur felt that his explanation of the meaning of human life was not getting through to Barnexa. He didn’t think that blurting out “forty-two” would have any greater effect, either. He tried to think of another way to convince her that a jail, even if it was very nice and clean and pleasant to live in, with chocomato bonbons whenever one wanted, was still a jail. He thought maybe that he could appeal to her sense of decency but then he had an epiphany. He was, after all, by all



appearances, the director of a large corporation. That should come with *some* power, right? “Miss Glip?” he called out.

Miss Glip appeared in the doorway behind Barnexa. “Yes, your horribleness?”

“Is there a security team in this building?”

“I could hire one.”

“Oh. How long would that take?”

“Not long. The company we use is very prompt.”

“Excellent. Could you please call them? I’d like Barnexa here escorted from the building.”

“Yes, sir!” She disappeared out to her desk.

“You’re arresting me?” said Barnexa with incredulity.

“Not arresting, just sending you away so that you don’t bother me and my friends anymore.”

“But you’re nearly extinct!

“Hey, extinction!” came a voice from behind Barnexa “That’s a good idea!”

Fondrew appeared, followed closely by Miss Glip. “Mr. Dent, Sir?” said Miss Glip, “Mr. Fondrew is here to see you!”

“He can see that!” snapped Fondrew. “Now, i have a problem, Arthur. The problem is that there are things that i want but i can’t get. In order to get them, i need to use the full weight of the *Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy* in my favor. In order to do that, i need to be the director of the *Guide*. And in order to be the director of the *Guide*, you need to be extinct!” He raised a laser pistol at Arthur and as he did so, Barnexa lunged,

knocking his arm aside so that the shot blasted into the far wall. As the two of them tussled for the pistol, two more people appeared at the door, followed by Miss Glip.

“Horrible Dent, sir? This person has a complaint about the lack of her pet being listed in the Guide.”

“Dimpie!” cried Nodwedge in surprise.

“Dent!” yelled Zarniwoop, crouched next to her on a lead.

“Quiet, Boopsie!” said Nodwedge.

“Zarniwoop!” said Fondrew from the floor, still firing off random laser shots around the office.

“You!” exclaimed Zarniwoop, recognizing Fondrew.

“Nobody kill the Earthling!” yelled Barnexa, wrestling Fondrew’s gun out of his hand.

“He has to be killed!” yelled Fondrew, sustaining a swift kick to his midsection.

“Don’t kill my Dimpie!” screamed Nodwedge in horror.

“Yeah, kill *her* instead!” shouted Zarniwoop, pointing at Nodwedge and using the confusion to try to escape from his lead.

At that point, Zarniwoop lunged for Arthur, Fondrew lunged for his pistol, Barnexa lunged for Fondrew, Nodwedge lunged for Zarniwoop, and two blobby gray-green creatures waddled up behind them all.

“Who are we supposed to kill?” asked Nnngk, randomly pointing his Kill-O-Zap at the growing mob. “Can we kill all of them?”

“Don’t get distracted!” said Ergo. He pointed his Kill-O-Zap first at one person, then another in the roiling clot of bodies on the floor in front of them. “Who’s supposed to be arrested and/or shot?”

Everyone yelled and pointed at everyone else, there was a lot of noise, a few laser blasts, and Arthur wished very much for a quick and easy way out of this situation.

As if on cue, the drawer on Arthur’s desk slid open farther than it should have, revealing a dark chute leading down into the floor.

# Chapter 52

Ford led Random up to the black spaceship.

“That’s the one?” asked Random, looking it over.

“Yeah. An Ectos. Ever heard of ’em?”

Random smiled. She ran her hand down the clean line of the craft as she walked along it. She stopped at the door. “Nice ship,” she said, patting it a couple times on the panel next to the entryway.

There was a little hum and click and the door unsealed itself and slid open. A step folded out. Ford gaped as Random climbed aboard.

“How did you— What— How—?” he spluttered as he joined Random in the common area of the ship.

Random walked over to the locked room off of the common area and touched a pad next to it. The door slid open and she looked in, making sure that everything was as she’d left it. She seemed satisfied and turned back to Ford. “It’s not ‘Ectos,’ it’s ECT-oh-five. Those are the designers initials. This is the fifth ship she built. Its a good ship. I like it.” She sauntered away to the bridge while Ford goobered around trying to adapt to the new situation. He ran after her.

“This is *your* ship?” he finally said, coming to this realization far slower than he felt he should have.

“Yeah. Don’t know what it’s doing here. Last time i saw it, it was parked on a barren little blip of a planet

right next to the Total Perspective Vortex.”

“I was there.”

“Were you? Did you steal my ship?”

“Not that i remember. Could have i suppose, but i think i would have remembered this one.”

“Well, anywhere you want to go? I just want to locate my crew, then i’m free to explore or steal things, whatever suits you.”

“I’m free as a tmik-tmik in galatomolting season!” Random punched some things into the computer, then looked at a screen. Ford peered at it as well. “What are we looking at?”

Random pointed to two dots near each other on a glowing map. “This is us. That’s Spuddy, but he’s staying here.” She pointed to a third dot a little farther away. “That’s Libby. We could probably walk there, but might as well fly.” She started firing up the ship’s engines.

“You have trackers in your crew?” asked Ford. “Bit dodgy.”

“I like to know where my team is on a raid. Keeps us from getting pinched.” The ship lifted off, spun around, and lazily cruised off to the strip of beach where the dot for Libby was.

---

Libby lay on a towel, watching the waves lap the shoreline. The sun shone warmly and Libby felt that everything was right in the universe. It was a nice, warm, happy feeling that was cut a bit too short by a dark

shape that temporarily blotted out the sun and threw her little section of beach into shade. The spaceship causing the short suspension of paradise swiveled around and touched down not far away on a landing pad on the other side of the nearest tiki bar. Libby sighed and turned to Eata, who was soaking up the sun next to her. “Looks like my family’s arrived.”

Eata opened her eyes and craned her neck to where the Grey was parked. “Hey, i know that ship!” She got to her feet, paused for Libby to join her, and they started toward it. Ford and Random were exiting the Grey when Libby and Eata walked up.

“Libby!” said Ford.

“Kookabura!” said Libby.

“Eata!” said Random.

“Kookabura?” said Eata, looking at Libby.

Libby answered Eata’s confused look with one of her own, looking at her and then Random. “You two know each other?” she asked.

“She built my ship,” said Random.

“I always liked this one,” said Eata, gazing up at the clean black lines. “Did you ever give it a name?”

“The Grey,” answered Random.

Ford was deciphering who knew who and flipped his head back and forth between them all, then up at the ship. “Why did you name it the Grey if it’s black?”

“Is it black?” asked Random. “Really black?”

“It’s pretty black.”

“But not as black as true black. Anything less than absolute black is merely gray, hence the name.”

“Ah,” said Ford, thinking that that was a silly name but not saying so. “Chocomato, chocomahto.” That bizarre utterance went ignored.

“So, we’re heading out soon,” said Random. “Sputty’s decided to stay here with Rutlow.”

“Oh, that’s sweet,” said Libby. “He always wanted a dog.”

“Yeah, so what about you? Ready to hit space?”

Libby looked lovingly at Eata, then put her arm around her shoulders. “If it’s all the same to you, i think i’ll pass on the life of piracy for now. I’ve found where i want to be in this universe.”

Random hugged them both, everyone said their good-byes, Eata told Random to take care of the Grey, Random told Eata to take care of Libby, Ford bounced on his toes a bit, waiting for everyone to finish up, then Ford and Random got in the ship and Eata and Libby walked hand-in-hand off to the sunlit beach. It was the kind of warm farewell from a story book that could only be surpassed by a romantic reunion between two long-lost lovers.

---

Coincidentally, a romantic reunion between two long-lost lovers was taking place right at that moment, except that it was between two short-lost lovers and it wasn’t at all romantic, as it involved Arthur’s clumsy feet smashing straightaway into Fenchurch’s upturned beautiful face as he slid down the dark chute from the

director's office and she peered up it.

"Aaughh!" said Fenchurch, crumpling to the floor.

"Oof!" said Arthur, thankful that something broke his fall but rather concerned that the thing that broke it said "Aaughh!" and crumpled underneath him.

"Watch where you're—" started Fenchurch.

"I'm terribly sorry—" began Arthur.

There is a universal feeling in all humans of finding something. Whether it's an answer on a test, a lost set of keys, a missing pet, or the love of your life, the feeling transcends all other feelings and goes beyond the pedestrian emotions of joy, relief, satisfaction, or even that feeling you get when you've broken the law and a police officer passes you and for some reason that you will probably never find out, keeps on going and doesn't detain you.

That was the feeling that both Fenchurch and Arthur had right now—the excited calm, the panicked relief, the frenzied normality of everything wrong being right again. It was a forever moment of everything and nothing happening in tiny gestures and an endless embrace that was decidedly not endless as the noise from above prompted the action below. Fenchurch threw the lever and heard the drawer above them sliding shut, Arthur followed her along to the elevator, already waiting for them, and the elevator happily zipped them up to the roof, where they stopped to finally take in their situation.

"How did you find me?" asked Arthur.

"I wasn't looking for you. I thought you were dead.



I was looking for Fondrew.”

“We left him up there arguing about killing things.”

“Killing things? Like what?”

“Mostly me. Seems he wants my job.”

“Fondrew gave you a job and now he wants it?”

“Did he give me my job? Maybe that’s why he wants it. I really don’t understand what’s going on, to tell the truth. I had an odd dream that i was floating in space with tiny spaceships shooting at me for some reason, and you were there talking to me.... Then i woke up here and was told that i was the director of the *Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy*.”

“You? Arthur Dent? The director?”

Arthur smiled sheepishly. “I have no idea why. I don’t want the job.”

“So resign!”

“Can i do that?”

“Why not? You’re the director, you can do whatever you want, i’d think.”

“Huh,” said Arthur, mulling over the idea. They discussed it further and decided to go back down to Employee Management where Arthur could tender his resignation. “You know, i was thinking,” began Arthur as they walked over to the main elevators.

“What’s that?” asked Fenchurch.

“You’re the best thing that’s ever happened to me.”

“No, what’s *that*?” repeated Fenchurch, pointing out into to crystalline sea. Arthur looked where Fenchurch was pointing. A giant thing was rearing up over and around the *Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy*

building. It was huge and purplish-gray and seemed to be growing ever larger as they watched. It was a beast from a bad science-fiction movie, a slime-monster from the depths of a nuclear-radiated ocean, an alien life-form of unspeakable horror.

“I think it’s an octopus,” said Arthur.

# Chapter 53

Me felt different. Me wiggled Me's six limbs and blinked Me's one eye and tapped Me's one tooth against Me's favorite rock. Everything seemed to be working the way everything always did, but there was an odd buzzing in Me's head and it felt like something was trying to escape from Me's thoughts, which wasn't a thing that Me thought could ever happen, nor was it a thought that Me had ever had before. And now Me's favorite rock was getting smaller. And that reef that Me liked to visit was getting closer, and shrinking under Me's third tentacle. And what was this big smooth shiny thing that Me was suddenly next to? Why was it getting smaller too?

Me felt Me's head break the surface of the calm sea where Me had always lived. Me wrapped Me's sixth tentacle around the squarish shiny thing with all the little clear blocks all over it and felt it shrink away as Me tried to grasp it. Me's eye lifted out of the water as there became less and less water and the sand below Me became finer and finer. Soon the squarish thing was just an annoying sharp bump next to some of Me's suckers. Me felt it quickly, then turned Me's attention to the big bright yellow thing above Me which seemed to be getting closer as the sky became darker and specked with tiny little lights.

The *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* building shuddered from the pawing of an enormous tentacle. Arthur was shouting into a communications panel. "Yes! This is the director, Arthur Dent! We're under attack! Get some help!"

"Do you require medical assistance?" came the reply.

"No! I mean, possibly! We need an army or something! There's a giant squid-thing attacking the building!"

"Acknowledged," said the calm voice. "One moment please."

"We may not have a moment!" yelled Arthur, but there was no further response. He looked helplessly at Fenchurch, who gave him a hug. They stood and watched the huge suckers slime over the clear bubble atop the Guide building, waiting for the inevitable crumbling and destruction that was sure to follow.

There was a *ding!* and a voice came out of the communications panel. "A fleet has been dispatched and should arrive shortly. Is there anything else i can help you with today?"

"A fleet?" said Arthur. "A fleet of what?"

"Is there anything else i can help you with today?" repeated the voice.

"Er... no?"

"Thank you for using this automated help service. Would you like to leave a rating of my helpfulness and

friendliness today?”

“I’m not sure how helpful you’ve been.”

“On a scale of one to seven, please indicate my friendliness today.”

“Thank, you, no!” said Fenchurch. She started punching buttons, trying to make the panel shut up. The building wobbled dangerously and Arthur held her tighter, unhappy about dying, happy that he was with Fenchurch if he had to die, but also unhappy that Fenchurch was dying. There was a lot of emotions surging around the *Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy* that day.

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Random fired up the engines of the Grey, popped up off the landing pad, and swung the ship around. The plan was to fly off to some unknown destination where Ford could do some research for the Guide and Random could do some research on stealing stuff. That plan was put on hold, however, when the two of them found themselves looking out at a humongous gray mass blocking the horizon and flexing its tentacles across the delightful sand beaches of Setasea 4.

“What the zarking Belgium is that?!” choked out Ford, trying to finish off the fruity drink that he’d swiped from the tiki bar before they’d left.

Random tipped the nose of the Grey upward and shot stupidly fast up out of the atmosphere so that they could get a look at the thing. She rolled the spaceship

over and she and Ford looked up. “Hexapus,” said Random. “Big one.”

“Colossally big,” agreed Ford, dabbing at the spilled drink all over himself. “Suppose they do that all the time?”

“Seems unusual.” They hung in space and watched the hexapus continue to grow.

“Y’think your friends are okay?” asked Ford in a moment of uncharacteristic concern.

Random drummed her fingers on the console, then grimly set her concentration to the task at hand and threw the ship downward, back to the planet.

Unfortunately, a few of the many ugly yellow spaceships of the Vogon constructor fleet that had just whipped into the space around the planet Setasea 4—having been alerted to the impending disaster at the *Hitchhikers’s Guide to the Galaxy* headquarters by the director himself—saw that as an aggressive maneuver (aggressively escaping, that is), and quickly tore off in pursuit.

At about the same time that the Vogons started firing laser blasts at the Grey, a burst of laser blasts emanated from the side of the gargantuan hexapus sticking its head out of the planet’s atmosphere. Following these laser blasts, the Heart of Gold blortched its way out of the beast, trailing bits of cephalopod in its wake. The Vogons, of course, saw these new laser blasts and assumed another aggressor, so returned fire with more laser blasts. All of these laser blasts attracted the attention of all of the players in the game of tag who’d been

orbiting the planet, hunting for a feeble signal from a blue-lit hoverbot which had only recently become much stronger and localized. The convergence of a few dozen spacecraft—all firing more laser blasts—on the Heart of Gold alerted the Vogons to even more unlawful aggressors and as they were not at all keen on unlawfulness *or* aggressiveness, they unleashed a phenomenally large array of laser blasts that lit up the skies over Setasea 4 and would have made for quite a beautiful show for anyone lounging on a pristine beach except that they were all in danger of being squished to death by unbelievably large hexapus suckers attached to even more astoundingly huge hexapus tentacles which were wriggling in spasmodic twitches all over the beaches of Setasea 4 because the brain of the hexapus in question just had a series of very hot and painful laser blasts fired from within it to outside of it.

“I love you!” shouted Arthur to Fenchurch as the building wobbled.

“Belgium!” uttered Random as she swerved around a flailing hexapus tentacle while simultaneously avoiding the Vogons on her tail.

“I think the storm’s passing,” said Spotty as he looked up at the gray mass slithering over the tiki bar.

“Everybody’s under arrest!” yelled Prutstet Vogon Blegm into his communicator from the largest and ugliest Vogon ship circling the planet.

“Hey, maybe we *don’t* rescue your friends?” suggested Ford, clinging to his chair as the ship snapped into a hard left turn.

“This would be pretty if it weren’t so apocalyptic,” said Eata, hugging Libby close.

“Down!” shouted Fenchurch to the elevator as she and Arthur tumbled into it.

“Who are we supposed to shoot?” Ergo asked Miss Glip, waving his Kill-O-Zap eagerly at the wrestling match of humanoids on the floor of the office.

“All of them?” suggested Nnngk with a tiny bit of an unusual Vogon emotion—hope.

“Are we regular-sized?” asked Trillian, looking out the window at the chaos outside.

“Who cares?” said all of Zaphod, all at once. “Eddie! Full speed that way!” Zaphod pointed, Random swerved, Fenchurch hoped, Blegm glared, Spotty whistled, Rutlow wagged, Eata smiled, Libby hummed, Ford burped, Ergo concentrated, Marvin sighed, Trillian clutched, Nnngk lurched, and Arthur, being Arthur, had no idea what to do. The infinite improbability drive engaged, and—



# Chapter 54

Me was happy. Me lived in a nebulous cloud of stellar matter, floating in a sea of little stars. There were bits of things passing by Me all of the time, which Me ushered into Me's mouth to sustain Me and make Me well. Some of these things fired little laser blasts at Me's giant tooth, but this only tickled Me. Me floated among a bunch of big round things where a lot of tiny things kept arriving and leaving. Each big round thing gave off rhythmic sounds which Me found soothing or invigorating or inspiring. Me had noticed that some of the tiny things that flew between the round things began landing on Me and Me didn't mind. They seemed to be harvesting Me's unused skin cells and they kept Me clean.

Me didn't remember how long Me had lived like this, but it was probably forever, or perhaps only a day. Me still had a little bump on Me's head where Me seemed to remember that something had been birthed from Me. Me didn't understand that, but it was so long ago that it really didn't matter, even if it had just happened a tick ago.

Me waved Me's tentacles gently, listening to the beats and sounds from the little orbs, living a stellar life for a hexapus. This is probably the way life had always been, and any memories of sand and rocks and a coral

reef and an odd squarish shiny thing in a twinkling cerulean sea may never have happened, or perhaps it always had happened, just not to Me.

# Chapter 55

“Arthur!” said Ford, bounding down the steps of the Grey. “Congratulations!”

“Er, for what? Quitting my job?”

Ford glanced at Fenchurch, then back at Arthur. “You had a job?”

“He was the director of the *Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy*,” said Rutlow. “So technically, he was your boss.”

“I have a boss?” said Ford.

“That’s generally how jobs work,” said Fenchurch.

“Huh. So if you’re not my boss anymore, who’s my boss now?”

“Er, well, we left it up to a few parties to decide amongst themselves,” said Arthur. “There seemed to be some consensus about a fight to the death, if i recall.”

“Wasn’t that *your* idea?” asked Fenchurch with a smile.

“Well, i wasn’t *serious* about it! But they seemed to, uh....” He looked around, hoping for some moral support.

Random shook her head. “C’mon Dad. We’re leaving. Have you figured out where you want to go?”

“We were thinking someplace not so hectic,” said Fenchurch.

“This place ain’t so hectic,” said Sputty. “Cept for

that boffo octopus—that was a bit dodgy. Whatever happened to that thing?”

“It’s best not to know,” advised Ford.

“You just don’t want to know,” muttered Random.

“That’s right! And i aim to keep it that way! C’mon Arthur, destiny awaits!” He bounded back onto the ship. Arthur, Fenchurch, and Random said their good-byes to Sputty and Rutlow, having already said their good-byes (for a second time for some of them) to Eata and Libby, who had flown away in Eata’s thankfully uncrushed TR4.

“So, any general area you want to head toward?” asked Random as they boarded the Grey.

“Actually,” said Arthur, sitting down next to his daughter as she settled into the pilot’s chair. “It seems that the *Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy* is a very progressive company and offers quite an attractive severance package, even for people who only work there for a day.”

“Or less,” added Fenchurch. “And even more attractive if you were the director of the Guide.” She leaned in and gave Arthur a kiss on the cheek. Random rolled her eyes.

“So what are you saying,” said Ford, “you’re rich?”

“Well, i wouldn’t call it rich”—he didn’t notice Fenchurch behind him nodding her head—“but it seems i have enough capital that we were considering buying our own spaceship, you know, so we could travel when and where we wanted to.”

“Smashing idea!” said Ford. “I know just the place!”

Half a tock later, the Grey touched down in front of Honest Griftman's New and Used Galactabulous Space Transport Emporium on the planet Pfieeee. Random hugged her father, told them all to get off her ship, and blasted away for some much-needed alone time where she wasn't being watched and wasn't in a zoo.

Ford Prefect bounded onto the lot the way he usually bounded when he was fabulously interested in something. Or the way he bounded when he was pretending that he was fabulously interested in something in order to catch off-guard whoever it was that he was bounding in on. In this instance, however, Ford was genuinely enthusiastic about the task at hand, so he bounded. Ford had purchased spaceships before and was always excited about closing a deal on a giant piece of technology that had the potential to hurl the prospective buyers into a star or black hole. He was especially excited to buy spaceships with someone else's money, and doubly especially excited when it was Arthur's money. Ford surmised that if he really had to buy a spaceship with his *own* money, he, quite frankly, wouldn't. His preferred method of acquiring transportation was simply to borrow a convenient spaceship when the need arose, although Arthur had pointed out many times that what Ford considered "borrowing," most rational people (especially the people who happened to own the spaceships that Ford "borrowed") generally considered "stealing."

But Ford would not be borrowing any spaceships today, unless circumstances warranted it. Ford never knew when circumstances might suddenly warrant the casual absconding of a nearby spaceship, so while he was certainly going to enjoy haggling with the spaceship salesman, he kept an eye out for any craft nearby that might need sudden, unexplained liberating.

“Ooh! Lookit that one!” said Ford, pointing out a large polished silver ship that looked somewhat like an oversized high-tech ski boot.

“I’m not sure that’s—” began Arthur, before Ford bounded away toward another ship.

“How ’bout this one?” said Ford, ogling an orange number that reminded Arthur of a lawn dart.

“Ford, i think that—” began Arthur again, before he was interrupted again, this time by some sort of blob-being that had oozed up out of the pavement much like soft-serve ice cream blops out of its dispenser, only upside down.

“May i herp you?” said the blob-being.

“No, thanks,” said Ford, “i got herped yesterday.”

“Oh, good,” said the blob-being. “Herping is such a chore. Then can i show you some spaceships? My name is Fnublo, and i’m the number one sales agent here at Honest Griftman’s.”

“Nice ta meetcha,” said Ford, sticking out both hands and a foot and shaking four or five of Fnublo’s appendages. “We’re looking for a ship. A cool ship.”

“Er, practical,” corrected Arthur.

“And fast,” added Ford.

“But affordable.”

“So you want something modern and stylish?” asked Fnublo.

“Stylish would be nice,” said Fenchurch.

“Well,” countered Arthur, “i’d say functional.”

“No you wouldn’t,” said Ford.

“I just did,” said Arthur.

“It’s true, he did,” added Fnublo.

“Well, he didn’t mean it,” said Ford. “Now, what have you got that’ll burn a hole through the pork-pie nebula before you can swallow your gum?”

“Why don’t i show you some of our newer models first?” said Fnublo. “That’ll give us a starting point. Follow me.” He oozed away and Ford, Arthur, and Fenchurch followed behind.

“Ford,” said Arthur, as they walked past rows of shiny spaceships, “i really should just get a practical ship, nothing fancy, so that Fenchurch and i can—”

“Oh, bah!” interrupted Ford. “Why bother owning a spaceship if you can’t own a *cool* spaceship? One that’s got style and class. One that turns heads when you’re just idling by a spaceport. One that you can *feel* when you hang a tight gravity slingshot around a neutron star. C’mon, Arthur, you only live, uh...”

“Once,” finished Fenchurch.

“Really?” said Ford, looking back and forth between the two of them. “I could’ve sworn that humans lived at least twice. Well, all the more reason to get something good.”

Arthur let the argument go as Fnublo had stopped

in front of a large spaceship that looked to Arthur like a cross between a monster truck and a blimp.

“This is our top of the line!” said Fnublo. “All the modern amenities, fully automated—”

“Too pedestrian,” cut in Ford.

“Well, perhaps this one here,” said Fnublo, gesturing at the ship next to it, which looked like an over-inflated motor-home. “Quite popular with the asteroidal sportsters.”

“Too cliché,” said Ford. “Look, be a frood and show us where the GOOD spaceships are.”

“I can see you’re a being of taste,” said Fnublo. “Follow me.”

He led them through canyons of imposing spaceships until they came to an area with smaller, sleeker craft.

“Now, here we have the classic models from TerraLuxe Vehicles - Regulus,” said Fnublo, gesturing at a curvy, chrome-accented sea-foam-colored spaceship. “The TVR Consulairre is both practical and stylish. Perfect for weekend getaways or a trip to the Eastern Spiral Arm.”

“Huh,” said Arthur, looking at the distinctive nose of the craft next to him. “Ford, does this spaceship look familiar to you?”

“Should it?” said Ford, suddenly paying attention to what was going on. “I don’t recall ever steali—, borrowi—, *owning* an over-designed family ship like this.”

“No, it looks like...” Arthur thought about where he’d seen this thing before and then it suddenly hit



him. "It's a Ford!"

"Another one?" said Ford, looking around him suspiciously.

"No, a Ford Consul Corsair. My father had one of these. An estate."

"Your father had a spaceship?"

"No, a car, Ford. A Ford car. Only it was... car-sized, not..." He gestured at the large vehicle in front of them. "Spaceship-sized."

"And you bring this up, why?"

"He's right, Ford," said Fenchurch. "Look at this spaceship. Look at the shape, the design. Apart from the much-larger size and the lack of wheels, it's almost exactly a Ford Consul Corsair. Same bonnet, same trim, same chrome accents."

"It's like someone stole the plans for my father's car and made it into a spaceship!" said Arthur.

Ford pondered the Consulairre for a moment and tried to imagine a twenty-foot-tall human driving it.

"And look at this one," continued Arthur. "Tell me that this doesn't look exactly like a Lotus Esprit. And over here, that's... that's... wow."

"Ooh," agreed Fenchurch.

"Belgium!" uttered Ford as they all stared at the next spaceship down the row. It was as near to perfect as a spaceship could be. The flowing lines, the curves, the impossibly long nose with the cockpit perched above it, more than halfway back. The way the whole package exuded grace and beauty and crazy power all at the same time.

“That’s an E-type,” said Arthur.

“I believe that you’re right,” said Fenchurch.

“Ah, i see that you folks know your spaceships,” said Fnublo. “This is the TerraLuxe E-type, a classic—”

“No, a Jaguar E-type,” interrupted Arthur.

“Jaguar?” asked Fnublo.

“Yes, Jaguar Motor Company. Of England. On Earth. I mean, this one’s an awfully lot larger and doesn’t have wheels, but it’s otherwise an exact replica. The chrome, the bonnet, everything!”

Ford and the Earthlings stared stupidly at the gorgeous machine in front of them while Fnublo looked at them, wobbling uncertainly. In fact, the TerraLuxe E-type *was* an exact copy of a Jaguar E-type, down to the last detail. The only major difference was that, instead of the cutouts where, on a Jag, there would be wheels, The TerraLuxe version continued the immaculate sweep of the side of the bonnet and wrapped it smoothly down under the craft, creating a shape that was even smoother and sexier than its automobile counterpart. Somehow, it looked even more like an E-type than an actual E-type.

“So, how about a test drive?” said Ford, bouncing up and down a little too eagerly.

“I’ll just have to see some identification,” said Fnublo.

“Absolutely,” said Ford, whipping out his *Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy* press pass and flashing it in front of Fnublo’s face. Fnublo eyed it quickly and his demeanor changed from polite obsequiousness to

eager fawning, although it was rather difficult to tell the difference between these two expressions as his face was more or less an animated translucent pudding. But Ford noticed the change and plied it for all it was worth. It turned out to be worth very little, as ten minutes of Ford warmly cajoling Fnublo to give him the keys to the spaceship was met with ten minutes of Fnublo repeatedly insisting that he'd have to run this by his manager. Finally, Ford relented and let Fnublo squish off to the manager's office.

Ford walked over to the E-type and tapped thoughtfully on the door.

"No, Ford," said Arthur.

"What?" said Ford, looking unconvincingly innocent.

"No, we're not stealing it," said Arthur.

"Oh, you're no fun," pouted Ford. He turned back to admire the E-type and Arthur admired it along with him while Fenchurch walked around it lightly running her hand along its smooth exterior.

"I could see us flying about in this," said Fenchurch.

"Really?" asked Arthur. "Don't you think it's a bit... much?"

"It's a spaceship Arthur. It ought to be cool."

"The woman has a point," said Ford, "unlike this beautiful ship—not a point on it!" He spotted Fnublo working his way back across the lot towards them. "I suppose that he discovered that i'm wanted in half the sectors on this side of the galaxy," mused Ford, eyeing possible exits.

“Oh, the probability of that is at least one-hundred percent,” said Fenchurch dryly.

“The real question is,” said Ford, thinking hard, which was something that he didn’t like to do, “what’s the *improbability* of him not finding out?”

“Uh, zero?” ventured Arthur.

“No!” said Ford, not at all casually. “It’s, um... just a tick...” He fished a scrap of paper and pencil out of a pocket and started scribbling some calculations. As Fnublo approached, Ford started reading out a very large number which Arthur suspected was completely made up. Ford read off the last digits just as Fnublo arrived. “... to one!” he declared, standing triumphantly.

Nothing happened. Fnublo may have blinked but it also might have been a sudden breeze getting a ripple to cascade across his face. Ford continued to stand mightily as nothing continued to happen in a way that was not as mighty. Arthur shifted his feet nervously, feeling uncomfortable with the not-very-mighty nothingness that was continuing to happen all around him. He was about to try out some sort of simple word of intervention when the overwhelming nothingness was abruptly and completely overwhelmed by a sudden somethingness. The something in question was a crack in the blueness of the sky which was accompanied by a sound that was something like a mixture of a clay pot breaking and a piece of stiff paper being torn in half, only a thousand times louder. Following this intrusion into the generally serene day was the appearance of a bright, sexy spaceship which plummeted from the

crack in the sky and hurtled toward Honest Griftman's New and Used Galactabulous Space Transport Emporium at an uncomfortably fast speed as the sky clapped shut above it.

If Arthur had had the sharp focus and quick thinking of a paramilitary survivalist, he would've been halfway to safety by this point, but he was Arthur Dent, and he did not have those things, so he stood and stared at the mass of sleek metal as it screamed downward. Fortunately, at the last moment, an array of retro-rockets fired and the spaceship abruptly stopped, hovering in the air for a few seconds before settling gently down on top of a few of the spaceships on the lot, smashing them to an impressive array of bits.

# Chapter 56

The Heart of Gold vroomped through space, causing, as it was wont to do, a certain degree of abject uncomfortableness in its occupants. Trillian's hair grew into a cocoon around her and she emerged as a liquid nitrogen-spewing dragon with a tail made out of old washing machines. She flew in this form over fields of teeth before disassembling like a pile of children's blocks and then popping out of a wool sock and becoming herself again. Marvin became human, lived a life of poverty in a dirt hut, and was killed by a plague, then shape-shifted back to his eternally annoying metal form. And Zaphod danced a soft-shoe hula dance before his bones leapt out of his body, reprimanded him for eating bargain-brand pasta sauce, and dove back into him to the strains of bagpipes. It was this brief interlude of bonelessness that made Zaphod happy. The little blue hoverbot above him (which had thought, briefly, that it was a giant molten bumblebee) registered the fantastically brief micro-slice of time when the bone count of Zaphod's body was zero. Having fulfilled its mission of counting down the number of bones in Zaphod's possession, it notified the Gamester that the mighty game of tag was over, spit out a random number indicating which bone was the grand prize winner, and unceremoniously self-destructed.

Once all of the occupants of the Heart of Gold were relatively human-shaped again, they all took stock of their situation and went about determining where they were.

“We’ve landed somewhere,” said Trillian.

“Smashing!” said Zaphod, unaware that they had, in fact, smashed a lot of things in the landing. He popped open a hatch on the side of the Heart of Gold and stuck his heads out.

“Where are we?” said one head.

“Is this where the party is?” said the other.

It was at this point that a smattering of emotions overcame the various beings who happened to have watched the arrival of this spaceship. There was a mixture of horror and disbelief coursing through the synapses of Fnublo’s gelatinous head. There was a mixture of disbelief and recognition in Arthur as he realized that the ship that just landed was the Heart of Gold. There was a mixture of confusion and humor in Fenchurch as she scanned the reactions of the others. There was a mixture of complete belief and cool confidence in Ford as he calmly strolled over to the E-type and began stealing it. And there was a somewhat volatile mixture of confidence, confusion, and probably horniness in the two heads of Zaphod Beeblebrox, which looked around trying to figure out where he was.

“Arthur! Fenchurch!” said a head which wasn’t at all attached to Zaphod but was, as it usually was, attached to Ford, who was gesturing that they should

join him in the E-type with no lack of dawdling. Arthur, being the proper Englishman that he liked to think that he was, felt that he should be of service to help out in the immediate chaos in front of him, but then it occurred to him that he was on a first-name basis with everyone involved and they all were quite aware of who he was and at this point it would probably be best to just not be there. As he was processing this line of thought, Fenchurch pulled him into the E-type.

The first thing they noticed about the interior of the TerraLuxe E-type was that it was not at all like the interior of a Jaguar E-type. Sure, it had the same touches of chrome, wood, and leather, but this was, after all, an interstellar cruiser that could comfortably carry a family of five, plus pets, in modern comfort. But once Arthur climbed up into the cockpit, he immediately noticed just how much like a Jag this E-type was. He slid into the low seat next to Ford and looked out of the bubble-shaped front glass past the endless nose of the ship and beyond to the deep blue of the upper atmosphere, which was where Ford was currently pointing the ship at an impressive speed. Arthur smiled as he listened to the roar of the engines. They didn't have the screaming whine of most spaceship engines, but had been specifically tuned by the TerraLuxe company to thrum with a satisfying growl. Arthur imagined himself on a country road in England, snug in the worn leather seat of a Jaguar, pushing the car on the straight-aways and easing up before diving into a turn. It made him feel wistful for Earth—for England—and he



enjoyed the moment as the E-type tore away into the star-speckled blackness of space. It certainly didn't hurt to have a beautiful woman by his side—an Englishwoman at that—even if the pilot was somewhere in the realm of being a raving lunatic from somewhere near Betelgeuse.

The idyllic moment ended suddenly with the arrival of a beeping noise coming from the dashboard. Arthur looked around and saw, in the video monitor that exactly matched the size and placement of a Jaguar's rear-view mirror, an image of the planet that they'd just left, receding into the distance. Slightly more conspicuous than the planet, however, were the images of two spaceships, both getting larger as they chased the E-type.

“Er, Ford,” began Arthur.

“What are they?” snapped Ford. “Vogons? Frogstar fighters? Scream-O-Blast police cruisers?”

“No, they're, er...” Arthur studied the two yellow-and-black ships closing in on them.

“They appear to be Triumph TR7s,” said Fenchurch.

“Belgium!” said Ford. “Are you sure?” He slammed the E-type into a quick roll and Arthur looked out of the cockpit window at the two pursuing ships. They were definitely TR7s, only, like on the TerraLuxe E-type that Ford—with the possible help (or at least lack of stopping him) of Fenchurch and Arthur—was currently stealing, with no tires—just smooth metal all the way down the wedge-shaped ship, making it even more triangular than a Triumph TR7 already was.

“Definitely,” said Arthur.

“And,” added Fenchurch, as a white-hot bolt of fusion energy ripped past them, “they appear to have laser-guns.”

“Noted,” said Ford, as a second laser blast glanced off of the front quarter-panel. “Well, let’s see what this baby can do!” He jammed the throttle to full and sped off toward a cluster of planetoids with the TR7s in hot pursuit.

Arthur was starting to feel queasy as Ford gleefully threw the E-type through one turn after another, sling-shotting around asteroids, planetoids, and whatever other chunks of rock happened to be drifting by. The TR7s were a bit nimbler than the E-type and would close the gap on the tight maneuvers, but Ford could lose them when he stomped on the throttle coming out of a turn. The problem for Arthur, and Arthur’s increasingly unsettled stomach, was that Ford didn’t seem to have any interest in losing the two TR7s, he just seemed to want to toy with them as he zipped around planets and enjoyed the spirited movements of the E-type.

“You know,” said Arthur, leaning into a particularly tight turn and trying to think of a topic of conversation that might lead Ford out of executing such particularly tight turns, “i suppose we could just take this ship back and claim that we were merely test-driving it.”

“We *are* test-driving it,” said Ford.

“It really appears that we’re stealing it,” said Fenchurch, happily enjoying the ride.

“That too.”

“Well, maybe we could, i don’t know, say we were from England and claim that this design is completely stolen?” suggested Arthur.

“What are the chances of that working?” said Ford as he snapped into a perfectly-timed Immelmann turn and blazed past the two surprised TR7s. He pushed on the throttle and shot away as the pursuers wheeled around in matching arcs.

“This is brilliant,” said Ford, looking around at the sporty cockpit. “Just brilliant. No fancy gadgets. No computer telling you what to do. Just metal levers and wheels that actually connect to *real* things that make the spaceship *go*. This is flying, Arthur. This is *really* flying.”

The direct hit on the rear bumper of the E-type by a well-aimed laser blast brought them all out of their reverie of charging down pastoral lanes in an English Jaguar to a jolting conclusion.

“Blerky rent-a-cops,” muttered Ford as he fiddled with the controls. “I wonder what the chance of them just—wait a tick! Chance!”

“Chance?” echoed Arthur.

“No! Not chance, non-chance! Improbability! Hang on....” Ford grabbed a pad of paper and began scribbling feverishly.

“Er, Ford,” said Fenchurch, as a second laser blast hit the rear quarter-panel and sent the E-type skittering sideways. Ford seemed not to notice and continued his calculations while Arthur and Fenchurch looked at each other helplessly.

“Ford!” said Arthur, with a bit more urgency as a third laser blast found the underbelly of the ship and nudged it with somewhat more urgency into a cart-wheel.

“Not now, Arthur,” said Ford.

“Ford! We are about to die!”

“Improbable. But I’ll add that in.”

“Into what?” sputtered Arthur. “What are you doing? Why aren’t you saving us?”

“Because,” said Ford, as another laser blast sent the ship into a shuddering death-wobble. “The chances of us surviving has an improbability factor of sixty-seven quadrillion, nineteen trillion, four-hundred fifty-two billion, nine-hundred and one million, eighteen thousand, six-hundred thirty-three to one-fifth.” He slapped the paper down on the dashboard.

That was all the universe needed. With a small turn and a great “meh,” things happened. Zaphod Beeblebrox, at that precise second, flipped on the Infinite Improbability Drive of the Heart of Gold and the gleaming ship, with a deafening “pop,” disappeared from where it was parked at Honest Griftman’s New and Used Galactabulous Space Transport Emporium, reappearing milliseconds later directly in front of Ford and Arthur. Fnublo suddenly forgot that he was missing a beautiful red TerraLuxe E-type, which was good, since he was also missing a second beautiful TerraLuxe E-type, this one in British Racing Green. The green E-type floated in space next to the red E-type next to the Heart of Gold.

The two TR7s that had been bearing down on the renegade red spaceship suddenly, right about when everything else was happening, transformed from their menacing TR7 shapes into modest non-threatening shapes—one into a functional utilitarian delivery ship that looked like two Defender 110s stuck together, the other into a Reliant Robin, which proceeded to tumble away out of control into the cosmos.

Ford maneuvered the E-type in to dock with the Heart of Gold. “Red or green, Arthur?”

“Ooh, green!” said Fenchurch, eyeing the ship next door.

“Done!” said Ford. “And congratulations!”

“Why do you keep saying that?” asked Arthur.

Ford looked at the two Earthlings. “Not sure. Something from my future memories, i think. Weird. Well, that’s time-travel for you!”

They docked with the Heart of Gold. Greetings spilled out, drinks were had, Marvin was ignored, and eventually they all made their ways to their respective ships to fly off in search of adventure, a nice relaxing vacation, or a really cracking bar.

Fenchurch gave Arthur a hug as he piloted the sexy green E-type off towards an unknown destination. “This worked out well,” she said.

“I don’t know when i’ve ever been happier,” he said.

She smiled and gave him a long kiss. “You’ll make an excellent father,” she whispered in his ear.

ADAM S. DOUGLAS

The End

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