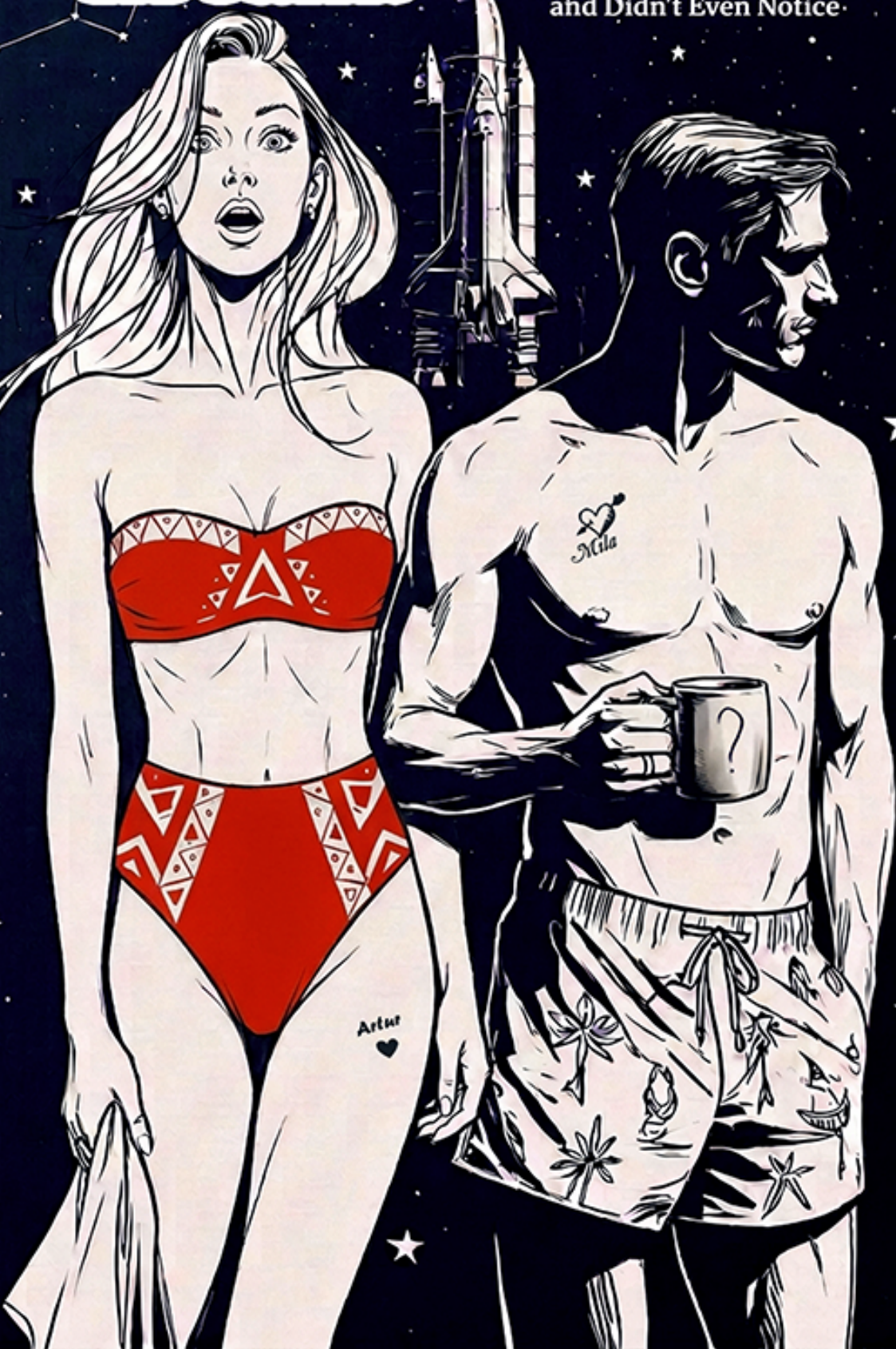


Arthur & Mila Ozyornye

What if it wasn't all in vain?

The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy,
or How I Rewrote the Universe
and Didn't Even Notice



A warm novel about the absurdity of existence, the irony of fate, and the importance of humor in the face of cosmic chaos...

August 28, 2026

Dedication

To my husband, the one who became my "yes" in a world of "what if"...

Thank you for inspiring me on starry adventures. Even if they only exist on paper...

You are my Arthur, and I will always be your Mila ...

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Prologue. That Very Day

Berlin, 1989. Autumn. The air smells of smoke, freedom, and strudel

Arthur stood at the entrance to a grey building. Inside lay documents. Not just documents — the formula for antigravity. A secret weapon that could change the balance of power in the world. If it fell into the right hands, people could build ships that fly without fuel. The world would become different.

Next to him stood Klaus. His partner. Klaus was a good spy, but he had one problem — he lost everything. Keys, documents, sometimes — his composure.

"Arthur," said Klaus, checking his pockets. "I've got everything ready. Here's the pass, here are the lockpicks, here are the building plans."

"Excellent," Arthur nodded. "Let's go."

They entered. The guards were asleep — Arthur had slipped sleeping pills into their coffee in advance. They went up to the second floor. Arthur opened the safe. The documents with the formula were inside. He took them, rolled them into a tube, and placed them in his inner pocket.

"Got it," he said. "Let's go."

They went downstairs. The corridor was empty. Arthur was almost at the exit when he heard Klaus's voice from behind:

"Arthur..."

"What?"

"I lost the car keys."

Arthur turned around. Klaus was standing in the middle of the corridor, patting his pockets. His face was pale.

"You lost the keys?" Arthur repeated. "Klaus, we're on a mission!"

"I know!" Klaus panicked. "I know, but they were in my hands, and I put them somewhere, and I can't remember where!"

"Check your jacket."

"I did!"

"Check again."

Klaus searched his pockets again. Nothing.

"They're gone," he said. "Arthur, they're gone. What do we do?"

"We have a backup plan," said Arthur. "We'll go out through the back door and call a taxi."

"A taxi in East Berlin?" Klaus was almost shouting. "Are you serious?!"

"Quiet!" Arthur put a finger to his lips. "Klaus, calm down. We'll get out now, and everything will be good."

But Klaus did not calm down. He paced the corridor, looking into corners. He was panicking. He grabbed his head and started talking to himself.

And at that moment, he pressed the alarm button.

Not on purpose. He just leaned his hand against the wall, and there was a button. Red. Big. With the words "ALARM" on it.

A siren howled through the building.

Arthur froze.

"Klaus," he said very calmly. "What was that?"

"I don't know!" Klaus shouted. "I just wanted to lean against the wall!"

"You pressed the alarm button!"

"I didn't press it!"

"You did press it! It's red! Can't you see a red button?!"

"I thought it was a light switch!"

Arthur looked at him. For a second, he held back. Then he couldn't help it and burst out laughing.

He laughed loudly, sincerely, uncontrollably. The situation was absurd. In his pocket lay the antigravity formula — a secret that could save the world and make them the greatest spies of all time. And his partner had pressed the alarm because he'd lost his keys.

"You... you pressed the alarm..." Arthur doubled over. "Klaus, you're a genius!"

Klaus stood silent. His face went from pale to red.

"You're laughing," he said quietly. "I almost ruined the operation, and you're laughing."

"Klaus, I didn't mean to..."

Klaus turned and walked toward the exit. The special forces were already running down the corridor, but Klaus walked straight toward them without looking back. Arthur wanted to stop him, but Klaus had already disappeared through the door.

Arthur was left alone. He put his hand in his pocket, checked that the documents with the secret formula were still there, and went out through the back door. He thought Klaus would calm down. That they'd talk tomorrow. That he'd apologize.

Klaus didn't calm down. He didn't talk. He left the intelligence service the next day.

And Arthur wouldn't see him for twenty more years...

Chapter 1. The Director's Office

Earth's orbit. MTC Station. The Director of Intelligence's office

Arthur sat in his office drinking tea. The tea was green, with jasmine, from a new mug. He had ordered the mug online a week ago. He spent a long time choosing, reading reviews, comparing prices. In the end, he settled on one that said:

"WHAT IF?"

And under the inscription — a drawing: a cup with steam forming a question mark. Simple. Clear. And most importantly, without pathos — or quietly epic.

Arthur took a sip and looked at the wall. On the wall hung a map of star routes of the MTC — the Intergalactic Transport Company. In common parlance, it was simply called "The Agency." Because an agency is a place that smells of old folders, where the coffee machine is always broken, and where the boss walks around with the look of a man who knows the answer to the main question of life but doesn't say it because "it's not allowed."

The map showed hyper-routes, planets, sectors. But Arthur knew the real map lay in his safe. Old, worn, with an island that doesn't appear on any modern map. Like a good joke that's not in any collection. He had found it in the archives many years ago and kept it. Simply because it was beautiful. And also, because he had a feeling.

Arthur sighed and looked out the window. Outside the window was Earth. Blue, round, with white clouds.

He had been looking at it for two years — and all this time, he thought it was just a video projection.

"Beautiful projection," he said aloud. "Very realistic."

The intercom crackled with the voice of Anna, his secretary:

"Arthur, it's not a projection. We're in orbit."

"Anna, I know you're joking."

"I'm not joking," she said. And then she added, more quietly, almost in a whisper: "And you'll remember this conversation more than once."

"Hmm... well, let's say," said Arthur and took a sip of tea.

He really hadn't noticed the inconsistencies. Food came in white containers. Gravity shifts happened so smoothly that he blamed it all on the "new air conditioning system." After all, he was a spy. And a spy looks for secrets on the outside. He didn't like checking his own reality. Arthur generally didn't like changing habits. He drank the same tea, went to work by the same route, listened to the same music. He had a playlist he listened to every day: Panic! At The Disco, ABBA, Queen. He sang in the shower, in the car, at meetings — quietly, but management noticed.

He especially loved "We Are the Champions." He sang it when signing important documents. Sometimes — when he wasn't signing them. Just because.

Anna would say: "Arthur, you're not at a concert." And he would reply: "Well, let's say I'm at the concert of my life"...

Arthur finished his tea and looked at the mug. "WHAT IF?" was written on it. He thought: "What if I turn on the music right now?" — and he did.

"We Will Rock You" started playing from the speakers. Arthur began tapping the rhythm on the table with his hand. He was about to start singing along when Anna's voice came through the intercom:

"Arthur, Gennady Petrovich is calling you. Urgently. He came in person."

Arthur turned off the music.

"What does he want?"

"He said he has an 'interesting proposal.'"

Arthur sighed. He knew these proposals. The Agency always wanted to destroy or rebuild something.

"Let him in," he said.

The door opened. Gennady Petrovich entered. Tall, bald, in a grey suit. He looked like a teacher who never gives A's. He sat down opposite Arthur and placed a folder on the table.

"Arthur," he said. "Glad to see you."

"Gennady Petrovich," Arthur nodded. "I don't have much time. I was planning to have lunch in an hour."

Gennady smiled.

"Dumplings?"

"How do you know?"

"I know everything, Arthur." He opened the folder. "We have a problem. Planet K-17-Beta-42."

Arthur frowned. He knew that code.

"Earth."

"Precisely. We're planning to build a new hyper-highway through your sector. The planet needs to be cleared."

"Cleared?" Arthur repeated. "You want to destroy Earth?"

"Liquidate it as an experimental zone," Gennady corrected. "The experiment is over. Observation is complete. We'll build a new route. The inhabitants of Earth... well, they'll move."

"Where to?"

"To a neighboring planet. We'll prepare new homes. They'll like it. There are no traffic jams there." Arthur took the folder. Inside was a document. Neat, printed.

"There are 8 billion people living there," he said.

"Yes," Gennady nodded. "An impressive number. But on a galactic scale, it's insignificant, Arthur. You understand..."

Arthur could hear his heart pounding. Somewhere far away, beyond the window, Earth was turning. He had been looking at it for two years and thought it was a projection. And now they were offering to erase it.

"I won't sign it."

Gennady slowly rose. He closed the folder, looked at Arthur with a hint of sadness, and said:

"You will sign it, Arthur. Because if you don't, someone else will. But I would like you to be with us. I respect you. You're a good specialist. Don't ruin your reputation."

He left. The door closed.

Arthur was left alone. He looked at the folder. Then at the mug with "WHAT IF?" Then at Earth outside the window.

He stood up and walked to the wall where a display board hung with photographs. Old, black-and-white, with yellowed corners. The faces of undercover intelligence officers who had worked under false names for decades. Among them was one face Arthur knew better than the others.

A young blonde with serious grey eyes. In the photo, she was in a simple dress, standing by a house with a white porch. Next to her — two boys, about seven and ten. All smiling.

"That's Vera," he thought. "Twenty years working in the United States. Her husband was also a spy. They posed as ordinary Americans. They were betrayed. Two weeks in prison. The FBI knocked on the door while they were having dinner... Children. Dinner. And suddenly — armed men. I remember she later said: 'We're not heroes. We were just doing our job.' I'm not a hero either. I'm just doing my job..."

He went to the safe and took out the map. On it was marked an island. An island that doesn't appear on any modern map of Earth. And an inscription: "This is where it all begins."

Arthur looked at the map for a long time. Then he turned it over. On the reverse side, in small letters, was written:

"Coordinates: sector G-17, planet 42-B. Don't try to find it on Earth. It's not there. The island is the key. The key is the door. The door is the question. And the question is..."

The rest of the text was erased...

"And the question is what?" Arthur whispered.

He looked at the mug. "WHAT IF?" was written on it.

"Well, let's say that is the question," he said.

At that moment, the door opened. Mila stood in the doorway.

"Arthur!" she said. "Can I come in? It's urgent."

"Mila?" Arthur was surprised. "What are you doing here?"

"I was at a meeting. And I heard that Gennady Petrovich came to see you. I know he wants to destroy Earth!"

"How do you know?"

"I'm a diplomat. I know everything." She walked up to the table.

Arthur looked at her. She was beautiful. And serious.

"I found a map," he said. "An old one. It marks an island. But it's not an island on Earth. It's the coordinates of planet 42-B in sector G-17. I searched for information about it for a long time and found out from secret SS documents that there, it's possible to rewrite reality."

"You want to rewrite reality?" Mila asked.

"Yes," said Arthur. "I want to erase one day. One laugh. And make the world fair."

"Are you sure?"

"Absolutely."

Mila sighed.

"Then we have to fly out. Right now. Gennady sent people after you with orders to take you by any means necessary."

The building shook from an explosion. Somewhere below, a wall collapsed.

"They're blowing up the escape routes," said Mila. "So, we can't leave."

Arthur grabbed the mug, the map, and his backpack.

"Run?" asked Mila.

"Run!"

They ran toward the exit. Explosions thundered behind them. The bureaucrats of MTC were on their trail. The Agency was working...

Chapter 2. Unintended Joy

Earth's orbit. MTC Station. Corridor

Arthur ran down the corridor. Fast. Confident. He was a spy, and even after two years in an office, his legs remembered what speed was. Mila ran beside him, but Arthur slowed his pace slightly so as not to pull ahead. He could have overtaken her, but that would have been impolite. Besides, she was a diplomat. She needed the confidence that she was leading.

"Arthur, faster!" Mila shouted, turning around.

"I'm running!" he shouted back. "I'm even faster than you, but I don't want to overtake you!"

"Are you serious?"

"Well, let's say I'm just being polite!"

She snorted but smiled. Arthur pulled ahead by half a step to show he wasn't joking.

"You're too fast for a director!" she shouted.

"I haven't always been a director! And I love disco, so you have to move fast!"

"I know! I've heard your playlist!"

They ran into a large hall. It was empty — MTC employees had evacuated or were hiding. Arthur looked around. In the center of the hall stood a ship. Small, worn, with peeling paint. On its side was written:

"Unintended Joy."

"Is that it?" asked Arthur.

"It's the only ship not parked in the hangar," Mila answered. "And I have the keys."

She ran to the ship, opened the hatch, and jumped inside. Arthur climbed in after her, nimbly, without a single wasted movement. Inside it was cramped, smelled of old plastic and shashlik. On the control panel hung a badge with an inscription: "Con Calme! Don't panic. We're already panicking for you!"

Mila sat down at the helm. Arthur plopped into the adjacent seat and buckled up.

"I've never flown a ship," he said.

"I have," Mila replied. "Twice."

"Twice?"

"Once — training. The second time — when I accidentally stole someone else's ship. But it wasn't my fault. They told me it was a taxi."

Arthur was about to say something, but at that moment the hatch slammed shut with a crash. The ship shuddered, hummed, and lifted off the floor.

"Hold on!" Mila shouted.

She yanked the controls toward herself. The ship shot upward, smashed through the glass ceiling of the hall, and flew out into open space.

Arthur squeezed his eyes shut.

When he opened them, he saw Earth. It was big, blue, with white clouds. It hung before him like a painting in a museum. And it was real.

"I'm in space," he said.

"You've been in space for two years," Mila reminded him.

"I know, but I didn't realize it! Those are different things!"

He looked at Earth. At its oceans, continents, at the thin atmosphere that protected billions of people. People who didn't know they were an experiment. People who just lived, loved, ate dumplings, and listened to rock.

"Beautiful," he said.

"Yes," Mila nodded. "Very beautiful. Too bad Gennady Petrovich wants to destroy it."

Arthur turned to her. She was looking ahead, piloting the ship. Her profile was sharp, confident. She knew what she was doing. Unlike him.

"Mila," he said. "Thank you..."

"For what?"

"For being here. For not abandoning me with this map and my thoughts."

Mila smiled...

Arthur looked at the map. On the reverse side was written: *"Coordinates: sector G-17, planet 42-B. Don't try to find it on Earth. It's not there. The island is the key. The key is the door. The door is the question. And the question is..."*

The rest of the text was erased...

"And the question is what?" Arthur whispered.

Mila shrugged.

"Maybe we'll find out when we get there."

"We'll make it," said Arthur. "We have the coordinates. And the map. And the mug."

"And the mug," Mila smiled. "That's the main thing."

She entered the coordinates into the navigator. A route appeared on the screen — long, winding, through three sectors.

"It'll be a long journey," she said. "Through three sectors, past a black hole, and past a planet with a name..." she squinted. "Strange name — 'Andromeda Bun.'"

Arthur froze.

"Andromeda Bun? That's a planet?"

"Yes. There's a gas station, a hotel, and apparently a diner."

"Do they have dumplings?"

"I don't know. The name isn't a guarantee."

Arthur thought about it. He wanted to ask why the planet was called that, but at that moment his stomach growled.

"I'm hungry," he said.

"We'll buy dumplings on Andromeda Bun, if they have any. But first we need to get away from the pursuit."

"Pursuit?"

Mila nodded at the screen. A red dot appeared on it.

"Fair Wind," she said. "Gennady Petrovich's ship. They're catching up."

Arthur looked at the screen. The red dot was approaching.

"What do we do?"

"I know one maneuver," said Mila. "But you'll have to trust me."

"I trust you."

"Good. Then buckle up."

Arthur buckled up. Mila grabbed the controls, engaged the acceleration, and the ship shot toward the black hole.

"Are you insane?!" Arthur shouted. "We're flying toward a black hole!"

"It's a diversionary tactic. They won't follow us because they're bureaucrats. They're afraid of risk!"

"What if they do follow?"

"Then we'll have a heart-to-heart talk with them."

"How?"

Mila turned to him and smiled.

"We'll think of something!"

She turned on the music. Queen's "Don't Stop Me Now" started playing from the speakers. Arthur began to sing along. He knew it helped not to panic. He looked at the screen. The red dot slowed down. "Fair Wind" indeed didn't follow them — it stopped, turned around, and flew back.

"Hooray! They got scared!" Mila said joyfully.

"Or they just didn't want to dirty their perfect suits," Arthur replied.

He leaned back in his seat and began to sing along:

"Is this the real life? Is this just fantasy? ..."

Mila laughed.

"Are you seriously singing?"

"I always sing. It's my superpower. And I run faster than you. That's my second superpower."

"You only run faster than me because I'm wearing heels!"

"Well, let's say," said Arthur and smiled. "But I'm still faster."

They flew, singing along to Queen. Earth remained behind them. Ahead, the black hole reached out with its gravitational tentacles. But they were moving away from it, because Mila had a plan. And Arthur had a mug and a belief that it was all not in vain.

The ship held its course, not slowing down.

Ahead lay the unknown...

Chapter 3. Andromeda Bun

Space. Ship "Unintended Joy." Arthur and Mila

The ship shuddered gently. Mila brought it out of hyperspace, and a planet appeared before them. It was small, greyish-blue, with thin rings of ice crystals. They shimmered in the light like garlands.

"Andromeda Bun," said Mila. "We're here."

Arthur pressed his face to the porthole. The planet looked quite ordinary. No buns. No pastries.

"Where are the buns?" he asked.

"The name isn't a guarantee," Mila replied. "You remember."

They entered orbit. The navigator showed that the planet had a refueling station, a small spaceport, and, as Mila had promised, a diner.

"We don't have much time," said Mila. "We'll refuel, buy some food, and leave immediately. Gennady Petrovich surely already knows we're here."

"How could he know?"

"He's a bureaucrat. He knows everything. And he has contacts at all stations."

They landed. The spaceport was small and cozy — just like on Earth, only with a slightly greyish-blue tint. Arthur got out of the ship and looked around.

And then he noticed the locals.

They looked like people. But they had six fingers on each hand. And they kept counting them — moving their fingers, as if checking that all were in place. They all had golden skin tones. Some were embarrassed by it and painted their faces with beige makeup.

"They're like people," said Arthur.

"Almost," Mila replied. "But they don't say hello."

"What do you mean, they don't say hello?"

"They say: 'Careful.'"

A local resident approached them — in a long cloak, with a hood thrown over his head. He looked at Arthur and Mila and said:

"Careful!"

"Hello," Arthur replied.

"We say 'Careful,'" the resident explained. "Because one of us once greeted someone unsuccessfully and fell down the stairs. Since then, we decided it's better to wish each other caution than politeness."

"Logical," said Arthur. "We'd like to refuel and eat. Where's the diner?"

The resident pointed to a building. It looked like an ordinary station.

"But be careful," he added. "We have voice scanners. If you don't sing your order, they won't let you in."

"Sing?"

"Yes. Every resident sings. Singing is our language. If you don't sing, the scanner thinks you're not real."

Arthur and Mila exchanged glances.

"Well, let's say," Arthur said encouragingly. "We'll manage."

They entered the building. Inside it was clean and bright. At the counter stood locals politely humming to themselves. Arthur approached the scanner — a small device resembling a microphone.

"Please sing your order," said the scanner in a synthesized voice.

Arthur smiled. Karaoke. His element.

"I want dumplings!" he sang to the tune of "We Will Rock You."

The scanner blinked. Then turned green.

"Access granted. Your order has been accepted."

Mila approached the next scanner.

"I'd like tea," she said in her normal voice.

"Please sing your order," the scanner repeated.

Mila sighed. She tried to sing:

"I'd... like... tea..." — her voice wavered and went falsetto.

"Incorrect intonation. Access denied. Please try again."

"Arthur!" Mila shouted. "Sing for me!"

Arthur walked over and, trying not to laugh, sang for her:

"Tea for Mila!" — to the tune of "We Are the Champions."

The scanner blinked and turned green.

"Access granted. Your order has been accepted."

"This is the strangest way to buy tea," said Mila.

"This is Andromeda Bun," Arthur shrugged. "Everything's different here."

They received their orders. Arthur took a plate of dumplings. They looked like ordinary dumplings, but they emitted a faint golden glow. Mila took her tea — it was blue.

"What kind of tea is that?" asked Arthur.

"Starlight," Mila replied, reading the label. "They say it helps with sadness."

"Has it been tested?"

"I don't know. But it's beautiful."

They sat at a table and ate quickly. The dumplings turned out to be delicious — with a golden glow and incredibly juicy filling. Arthur was about to ask for more when a stranger approached their table.

She was young — about thirty, no more. Blonde hair pulled into a casual bun, large grey eyes, a strict dark suit that fit her perfectly, as if tailored in London. In her hand, she held a cup of blue tea and looked at Arthur with a slight, somewhat mocking smile.

"You're not from here," she said. It wasn't a question.

Arthur tensed.

"We're just travelers."

"Travelers don't hide," she nodded toward the counter, where Arthur noticed someone in MTC uniform watching them too closely. "But you're hiding. I know that look."

"Who are you?" asked Mila.

"Vera," the woman replied, sitting down at their table without an invitation. "Former undercover intelligence officer. Now an independent consultant for MTC. I'm not bound by bureaucracy, so I can say what others keep quiet about."

She took a sip of tea and added:

"For example, that Gennady Petrovich has put a bounty on your heads. And that there are already people on this station who want to collect it."

Arthur flinched.

"If you want to hide — don't run. You blend into the crowd. And here, on Andromeda Bun, everyone sings. Trust me, I know what I'm talking about."

She nodded toward the hall, where the locals were humming something melodic.

Vera reached out and placed a small book with blank pages on the table in front of Arthur. There was no title on the cover.

"This is my book," she said. "When you stand before the Point of Rewriting — open it to any page. It will show you what you need to know."

"Thank you, but how do you know where we're going, and why are you helping us?"

Vera looked at him for a long moment. Her eyes became serious.

"Just save our Earth..."

She stood up.

"And one more thing, Arthur." She leaned closer. "On the Island, don't believe the first thing you see. The Point of Rewriting will show you your past. The temptation to fix it will be immense. But remember: the past is not a mistake. It is experience."

She turned and walked toward the exit.

"Vera!" Arthur called out. "How can we find you if we want to thank you?"

She turned around. Smiled.

"Don't look for me. When the time comes, I'll find you myself..."

And she began to sing something familiar, melodic, and disappeared into the crowd of singing locals. At that moment, a voice came from behind them:

"Hey!"

Arthur and Mila turned around. Klaus stood at the entrance.

He had aged a little, wrinkles had appeared on his face. He was wearing an MTC uniform with a badge on his chest.

"Klaus?" Arthur stood up.

"Arthur," Klaus nodded. "I knew you'd be here. I was waiting for you!"

"How did you know?"

"Gennady Petrovich sent out a message. All stations have been alerted. You're wanted, Arthur. You stole a ship, and you didn't sign some important document..."

"I couldn't sign it, Klaus. It's about destroying Earth!"

"I know already," Klaus sighed. "But I'm not here to arrest you."

"Then why?"

Klaus stepped closer. He looked around, checked that no one was watching, and whispered:

"I'll help you."

Arthur froze.

"You want to help me?"

"I've thought about that day for many years, Arthur. About that laughter. You hurt me then. But I realized something. You were right. I was too serious. I lost the keys, pressed the alarm, almost blew the operation. You laughed because it was funny. And I was offended because I was a fool."

"Klaus..."

"Let me speak," Klaus interrupted. He looked at the map Arthur was still holding. "I know this map. I saw it many years ago, in Germany. You said it was just an old map. But I knew it led to something important. And when I started working at MTC, I came across documents about planet 42-B. There was a description of this map. And it mentioned the Point of Rewriting. A place where reality can be changed."

"How do you know?"

"I've been working at MTC for twenty years, Arthur. I know more than you think."

"We know where we're going," said Mila.

Arthur looked at Klaus. He still remembered the Klaus who stood in the corridor with lost keys. But now he was different. Serious. Decisive.

"I trust him," said Arthur. "He's my partner."

Klaus smiled. For the first time in many years.

"Then let's go," he said. "We don't have much time. Gennady Petrovich is already on his way." They ran out of the diner. Arthur turned back on the run and melodically called out to the scanner in the key of C major:

"Thank you for the dumplings!"

The scanner blinked green.

"Careful," it replied.

Chapter 4. The Feat of Svetozorov

Space. Ship "Unintended Joy." Arthur, Mila, and Klaus

The ship was flying on its set course. Klaus sat at the navigation panel, typing something on the screen. Arthur drank tea from his mug. Mila watched the instruments.

"Are we okay?" asked Arthur.

"So far, yes," Mila replied. "But I don't understand why Gennady isn't pursuing us. It's too easy."

"Maybe he's just waiting," said Klaus. "He's always waiting. He has a plan."

"Or he just doesn't want to dirty his perfect suit," Arthur smirked.

At that moment, the cabin was flooded with bright light. The ship shook. Arthur dropped his mug (in zero gravity, it floated in the air).

"What is that?!" he shouted.

"Quantum teleportation!" Klaus cried out in horror. "They're inside!"

Three figures materialized in the center of the cabin. They appeared from a blue glow, and when the light faded, Gennady Petrovich, a tall loud man with a notepad, and a blonde woman in glasses with a glass of Bisol Valdobbiadene Superiore di Cartizze stood before them.

Gennady adjusted his tie.

"Hello, Arthur. I told you, you wouldn't get away."

Arthur stared at him with his mouth open.

"How did you get here?!"

"Quantum teleportation," said Gennady. "The Agency's latest technology. We can move anywhere within the galaxy. I've locked your navigator. Now you're flying on my route, following my ship, back to Earth's orbit."

Suddenly, the tall man stepped forward. He was tall, in a stylish jacket, with a notepad in his hand. He smiled broadly.

"Olesandr Svetozorov," he said. "Reporter. I'm doing a report on corruption in MTC. Gennady Petrovich graciously agreed to show me the truth."

"Oh, Olesandr," the woman in glasses sighed. "You promised it would be just an interview. And now we're in space. On a ship with criminals, hijackers..."

"Lida," Svetozorov turned to her. "This is called a 'surprise report.' That's how bestsellers are born!"

"This is called 'sudden madness,'" Lida replied.

"This is called 'life,'" Svetozorov corrected her.

He turned to the others.

"So, let's get acquainted. I'm Olesandr Svetozorov. A celebrity. Billions watch my reports. I'm an atheist. I don't believe in God, aliens, or quantum teleportation. Apparently, I was wrong about at least one of these. But I still don't believe in God. That's a matter of principle."

"Olesandr," said Arthur. "Why are you here?"

"Because MTC is trying to destroy Earth. And I want to make a report about it. I'll make a big story. Everyone will see the truth. Gennady Petrovich will look like an idiot."

"I don't look like an idiot," said Gennady. "I look like a department head."

"You look like a man who will let the criminals get away," Svetozorov retorted.

Gennady took a step toward him.

"I'm the head of an MTC department. I have the authority to arrest you for interfering with operations. I brought you onto this ship so you could write a sensational story, and you!"

"You have no authority," Svetozorov replied. "Because I'm a reporter, and I have the right to know!"

Gennady pulled out a blaster and fired at the control panel. The ship rocked. The smell of burnt wiring filled the air.

"The next shot goes into the engines," he said coldly. "And you'll be stuck here forever."

At that moment, Svetozorov stepped toward Gennady and snatched a small device from his hands — it was a teleporter.

"How is this possible! Thief!" Gennady shouted.

"Yes, this is your teleporter," Svetozorov replied. "A very convenient device. But I'm not going to send you back. I'm going to send us where we all need to be — to save our planet!"

He turned to the others.

"Quickly! Everyone here! Grab hold of me!"

Arthur, Mila, Klaus, and Lida grabbed Svetozorov's shoulders. Gennady tried to grab the device, but Svetozorov deftly pushed him aside.

"You wouldn't dare!" Gennady shouted. "You're violating all protocols!"

"Protocols are meant to be broken," Svetozorov replied. "And besides, I'm a reporter. I'm above protocols!"

He pressed the button. A blue glow enveloped them.

Gennady was left alone in the cabin of the "Unintended Joy." He stared at the empty space where his enemies had just stood and shouted into the void:

"Bring me back! I'm a department head!"

But no one heard him. Smoke from the smoldering wiring of the control panel gradually filled the cabin.

"Wow!" Arthur shouted as the glow began to fade. "This is Gennady's ship! How did we teleport onto his ship?"

Svetozorov smiled triumphantly.

"Simple. I quickly entered the coordinates of 'Fair Wind' into the teleporter. And I knew your ship was slow. You wouldn't have escaped on the 'Unintended Joy.' But this beauty will take us anywhere."

"But we left Gennady on our ship!" said Mila.

"Precisely," Svetozorov nodded. "And now we have speed, and he doesn't. Fair trade."

At that moment, they heard a voice:

"Good evening!"

Everyone turned around. In the chair sat a man with a bushy mustache. He adjusted his tie, looked up from his tablet, and calmly surveyed them. As if the appearance of five strangers in his cabin was an everyday affair.

"Who are you?" asked Arthur.

"Dmitry Arkadyevich," the man replied. "Gennady Petrovich's personal secretary. I always teleport with him, but this time he left me here because he was counting on Svetozorov and Lida's help. He said: 'Dmitry Arkadyevich, wait. We'll teleport to the "Unintended Joy" and be back in 17 minutes with the fugitives.' But he didn't return. Twenty-three minutes have already passed. This is a schedule violation."

"We left him..." said Arthur.

"Left him?" Dmitry Arkadyevich looked at them. "Where?"

"On the 'Unintended Joy.'"

Dmitry Arkadyevich took his tablet, opened the schedule, and said calmly:

"This is not provided for in his schedule. The schedule had an item 'Teleportation.' There was no item 'Stay on the old ship without your secretary.' Now his schedule is completely broken. I don't even know what to do. I have no instructions for this case."

"Dmitry Arkadyevich," said Arthur. "We're taking over this ship. We're flying to the Island. Decide — are you with us?"

"The Island?" Dmitry Arkadyevich scrolled through the tablet. "The Island is not on Gennady Petrovich's route. The Island is not on any schedule item for the next three years."

"But we're flying to the Island," Mila said firmly.

Dmitry Arkadyevich looked at them for a long moment. Then he re-read something on his tablet. He sighed.

"The schedule has an item 'Unforeseen Circumstances,'" he said. "I'll consider this an unforeseen circumstance."

"Dmitry Arkadyevich," said Svetozorov. "We're saving our planet Earth."

"I agree. We're flying to the Island. However, I will be forced to keep a protocol."
He took his tablet and began typing.

"So, entry in the protocol: 'At 15:47, unknown persons boarded the "Fair Wind." Group composition: Arthur (former intelligence officer), Mila (diplomat), Klaus (MTC employee, left without dismissal). Olesandr Svetozorov (reporter) and his wife Lida returned and defected to the side of the captors. They all seized the ship. Dmitry Arkadyevich did not offer resistance, as this is not provided for by his instructions.' Sounds plausible."

"I'm a mathematician," Lida corrected, taking a sip of Bisol Valdobbiadene Superiore di Cartizze.

"I'm not a 'reporter's wife,' I'm a specialist in digital anomalies."

Dmitry Arkadyevich looked at her and added to the tablet:

"...and mathematician."

"That's it," he said. "I've made the entry. Now we are officially in an unforeseen circumstance."

"Dmitry Arkadyevich," said Mila. "Can you pilot this ship?"

"I have access," he replied. "I'm Gennady Petrovich's secretary. I have access to all his systems."

"Then take off," Arthur said.

Dmitry Arkadyevich pressed a button on the panel. The ship came to life and hummed.

"Course — sector G-17, planet 42-B," he announced. "Travel time — three hours. Warning: if Gennady Petrovich calls from the 'Unintended Joy,' I'll tell him it's an 'Unexpected Inspection Event.' He has no instructions for such a situation, so he'll believe it."

"How do you know he'll believe it, since he's from the Agency?" asked Arthur.

"I've worked with him for twenty-five years," said Dmitry Arkadyevich. "I know all his weaknesses. And I know he's more afraid of improvisation than of any enemy. Because improvisation is something that cannot be provided for in a schedule."

He sighed and added:

"And this will not be provided for by Gennady Petrovich's schedule. It will be my schedule. My own, creative improvisation — everything I love and am good at. My unjustly hidden talent."

Lida walked over to the navigation panel. She pressed a few buttons, and the exact cosmic address of planet 42-B appeared on the screen:

Planet 42-B "The Island"

Star system: System G-17

Planet in system: Second from the star

Galactic arm: Wanderer's Arm

Galaxy: Milky Way

Supercluster: Laniakea

Galactic filament: Filament of Lost Maps

Universe: Observable Universe

"There it is!" Lida exclaimed. "We'll be there in three hours. If we don't do anything stupid and don't commit any new feats" — she looked significantly at Svetozorov.

Six people sat in the cabin of "Fair Wind" flying toward the Island. The ship was fast, powerful. And they had three hours to figure out what they would do when they arrived.

Arthur took his mug. The inscription "WHAT IF?" looked back at him...

Chapter 5. Philosophical Flight

Space. Ship "Fair Wind." En route

The first half hour of the flight was spent in conversation. Arthur and Klaus told everything they knew about planet 42-B: what was written on the reverse side about the "key" and the "door," and that the coordinates led to sector G-17. They shared what they had once read in secret MTC documents marked "SS" — about the Point of Rewriting, a place where reality could be changed. Svetozorov listened silently, but from the way he clutched his notepad, it was clear — he had already recorded everything and drawn his conclusions.

"Three hours," said Arthur. "We have three hours to decide what we'll do and how we'll act on the Island."

"I know exactly what we'll do," said Svetozorov. "We'll find the Point of Rewriting and change everything."

"Do you really believe it will work?" asked Lida.

"I don't believe," Svetozorov replied. "I'm an atheist. I don't believe in anything supernatural. But I believe in facts. And the fact is that the Agency destroys planets. And if there's a chance to stop it — we must use it."

"And if it's a hoax?" asked Klaus. "If the Point of Rewriting is just a legend?"

"Then we'll find another way," said Arthur. "I can't let them destroy Earth."

"Why?" asked Dmitry Arkadyevich, not looking up from his tablet. "It's just a planet. On a galactic scale, Earth doesn't matter."

"It matters to me," said Arthur. "There are people there who just live, love, eat dumplings, and listen to rock. They don't know they're an experiment. And I don't want them to find out."

"Sounds touching and sentimental," said Dmitry Arkadyevich. "But I understand. Gennady Petrovich's schedule doesn't have an item for sentimentality, but I can add it. As a 'special circumstance.'"

"What if we change MTC?" said Arthur. "What if we create a new system where planets aren't destroyed?"

"How?" asked Mila.

"Of course! If the Point of Rewriting can change the past, why can't it change the future?!" Svetozorov exclaimed.

"Maybe it doesn't work like that," said Lida. "The Point of Rewriting isn't a 'reset' button. It's more likely a place where you can change one thing. One event. Not the whole system."

"Then we'll change the system through one event," said Arthur. "We'll change the moment when the Agency started this experiment. We'll make it so Earth was never an experimental zone."

"Then that means Earth would cease to exist," said Lida.

"What?"

"If Earth wasn't created as an experiment, then it doesn't exist. It was never conceived. You'd be erasing its existence!"

Arthur fell silent.

"Then we can't do that," he said.

"Why?" asked Mila.

"Because if Earth doesn't exist, then neither will I, nor any of you. Nor you, Mila. You're also from Earth."

Mila smiled.

"I'm not from Earth," she said. "I'm from Venus."

"What?!"

"I was born on Venus. The experiment extended to the entire Solar System. I'm part of the experiment."

Arthur looked at her in surprise.

"You never told me..."

"I thought you knew," she said. "You're the Director of Intelligence."

"Sometimes I feel like I don't know anything," said Arthur. "I've been in space for two years and thought it was a projection!"

He sighed.

"So, we can't erase the experiment. And we can't just destroy MTC. So, what can we do?"

"We can change attitudes," said Klaus. "The Agency is a system. A system consists of people. If people change, the system will change!"

"What people?" asked Svetozorov. "We're six people against the whole galaxy. We don't have an army. We have no power!"

"Wait! We have a map," said Arthur. "And we have the Point of Rewriting. And if we can change not the past, but the present. We can make people see the truth. Make them know that MTC destroys planets. And then they will change."

"You mean we'll use the Point to create a resistance movement?" asked Mila.

"Yes," said Arthur. "We can't change everything. But we can change one thing. And if that one thing sets off a chain of events, the world will change itself!"

Dmitry Arkadyevich looked up from his tablet.

"I need to make changes to the schedule," he said. "It will now include an item 'Saving the Galaxy.' That'll take three hours. Just in time for arrival."

"Seriously?" asked Arthur.

"I'm always serious," Dmitry Arkadyevich replied. "This is my job. Especially when it comes to saving our planet and the whole galaxy. I'll have the biggest item on the schedule in my entire career."

Everyone fell silent.

Arthur looked at the mug — "WHAT IF?" looked back at him from the blue tea. He suddenly realized that the question wasn't what to do on the Island. The question was what they had already done. They had come together. They had believed in each other. They flew through space to save a world that didn't even know it needed saving. And that was already an answer. Maybe not to all questions. But to the main one — definitely.

The ship flew onward. Stars raced past the porthole. Six people silently watched them, each lost in their own thoughts — but all thinking about the same thing.

And then they heard a sound. Loud, insistent, like snoring. It came from somewhere deep inside the ship.

"What's that?" asked Arthur.

"I don't know," Dmitry Arkadyevich replied. "The ship's schedule has no item about extraneous sounds."

The sound repeated. Now it sounded more distinct — someone was definitely snoring.

Svetozorov stood up.

"I'll check."

He walked down the corridor. The others exchanged glances and followed him. They stopped at the cabin where the sound was loudest. Svetozorov opened the door.

In an open space capsule — a decompression chamber — lay a man. He was in an orange vest, with a crew cut and thick eyebrows. He was sleeping soundly and snoring softly. Next to him on the table stood a flask.

"Hey!" Svetozorov shouted. "Wake up!"

The man jolted, opened his eyes, and sat up. He looked at Svetozorov, then at the others, then at the ceiling.

"Where am I?" he asked in a hoarse bass.

"On the ship 'Fair Wind,'" Svetozorov replied.

"And where's Gennady Petrovich?"

"On another ship," said Arthur. "We've taken over this ship, don't worry, we're not space pirates."

Svetozorov quickly jotted something down in his notepad.

The man slowly stood up, adjusted his orange vest, and said:

"My name is Sergey Ivanovich. I'm a repair engineer with the space rescue service. I was supposed to inspect this ship. I came into the cabin and accidentally fell asleep. And when I woke up..." — he looked around... "Where did you say we're flying?"

"We're flying to the Island," Mila replied.

"The Island?" Sergey Ivanovich frowned. "That's not on my route. I was supposed to check the engines and return to base. You see, I don't have time for the Island. I have a schedule!"

"We all have schedules," said Dmitry Arkadyevich, not looking up from his tablet. "But now we're all in an unforeseen circumstance."

"I can't be in an unforeseen circumstance," Sergey Ivanovich replied. "I'm an engineer. I have to be where there are instructions. And there are no instructions for the Island. There's not even an inspection there! This violates all norms!"

"Sergey Ivanovich," said Arthur. "We're flying to the Island to rewrite reality and save Earth from destruction."

Sergey Ivanovich looked at him suspiciously.

"Earth is going to be destroyed? Rewrite reality? That's not in the instructions. There isn't a single document saying I should participate in rewriting reality."

He took out his radio.

"I'll call the space rescue patrol. They'll come and pick me up. I can't be part of this. It's too dangerous."

Svetozorov smoothly stepped forward. He held the teleporter in his hand.

"Sergey Ivanovich," he said calmly, "you can call the patrol. Or you can fly to a planet where there isn't a single repair point. For example, to the planet Bureaucracy Centauri Prime. There, people fill out applications for everything, and to repair anything, you need permission from forty-seven departments. I can teleport you there in a second. The choice is yours!"

Sergey Ivanovich looked at the teleporter. Then at Svetozorov. Then at the others.

"That's a threat," he said.

"It's a metaphorical suggestion," Svetozorov replied.

"I'll remember this. And if your teleporter breaks, don't call me."

Everyone laughed.

Sergey Ivanovich paused. Then he put away his radio and sighed.

"I agree," he said. "But only because I need to know how this Island works. I'm an engineer. I need to understand how things work. If there are mechanisms there, I need to inspect them. That's my job."

"So you're with us?" asked Mila.

"Yes," Sergey Ivanovich replied. "But I demand that you record that I'm doing this under duress."

"We'll record it," said Dmitry Arkadyevich, making a note on his tablet. "So, entry in the protocol: 'Sergey Ivanovich, space rescue repair engineer, joined the crew under threat of teleportation to the planet Bureaucracy Centauri Prime. Acted involuntarily, but with an understanding of technical necessity.'"

"That sounds too official," said Sergey Ivanovich. "But I agree."

"Then let's get acquainted," said Arthur. "I'm Arthur. This is Mila, Klaus, Olesandr Svetozorov, Lida, Dmitry Arkadyevich..." — he gestured around. "And you're now our seventh."

"Seventh?" Sergey Ivanovich repeated. "I've never been seventh. I've always been first. Or second. But not seventh."

"Now you're seventh," Mila smiled. "And you're part of our team."

"We have an engineer," said Klaus. "That's good."

"We have a reporter," Lida smiled and winked at Svetozorov.

"We have a mathematician," Svetozorov said loudly and clearly.

"We have a diplomat," Arthur said.

"We have a former intelligence officer," Mila said cheerfully.

"We have a former partner," Klaus smiled.

"And you all have a secretary with a tablet," Dmitry Arkadyevich proclaimed epically. "I've recorded it all. Now there are seven people on the schedule. This is the biggest schedule I've ever maintained in my life!"

Seven people flew toward the Island. Each with their own story, their own character. But all with one goal — to save planet Earth...

To pass the time, Arthur turned on the music. "Bohemian Rhapsody" started playing from the speakers.

"No," said Svetozorov. "Not that."

"Why?" asked Arthur.

"Because when that song plays, I start singing along. And I can't sing."

"That's not a problem — in karaoke, nobody can sing."

He began to sing along:

"Is this the real life? Is this just fantasy?"

Mila joined in. Klaus too. Even Lida started singing along and swaying her glass to the rhythm. Svetozorov held out, then gave in, singing in falsetto.

"I'm just a poor boy, nobody loves me..." — they all sang in chorus.

"Terrible," said Dmitry Arkadyevich, but his tablet showed an entry: "20:45 — collective singing. Boosting morale."

"Is that on the schedule now?" asked Arthur.

"Yes. Item: 'Karaoke as a Means to Combat Cosmic Despair.'"

Everyone laughed.

The ship continued on its way. Laughter filled the cabin. Seven people, seven personalities, one goal.

Chapter 6. The Island

Space. Ship "Fair Wind." Arrival

The ship smoothly dropped out of hyperspeed. A planet appeared ahead. It was small, greyish-blue, with a thin atmosphere shimmering in the light like a soap bubble. The only continent — elongated, uneven, like a frozen wave — rose above the ocean. It looked like an island.

"That's it," said Lida, looking at the screen. "Planet 42-B. The Island."

"On the map, it's drawn as an island," said Arthur. "And it really looks like an island."

They entered orbit. Sergey Ivanovich, who had already checked all systems, stood at the porthole and frowned.

"I don't see a single port," he said. "Not a single landing pad."

"Then we'll land right on the surface," said Mila.

She guided the ship down. They entered the atmosphere. The ship shook slightly, and they saw the surface of the planet.

It was barren. No vegetation, no cities. Only an endless expanse covered in fine sand shimmering silver. And in the center rose a crystal.

It was huge. The height of a ten-story building, translucent, shimmering with all the colors of the rainbow. A soft light emanated from it, pulsing in a rhythm like a heartbeat.

"Is this it?" asked Arthur.

"Yes," said Klaus. "It looks like this is the Point of Rewriting. The crystal holds all the information about the Universe. It was created along with it. And it can change anything."

"How does it work?" asked Svetozerov.

"You need to clearly formulate a desire. One desire. You can't change it after you've said it."

Everyone fell silent.

"So, we need to choose one desire," said Arthur. "Only one."

Arthur took the mug with the inscription "WHAT IF?" and walked toward the exit.

"You're taking the mug?" asked Mila.

"I'm taking my philosophical anchor," he replied. "Maybe it will help me make the right decision."

When the ship landed, he stepped out. His foot touched the planet's surface. The sand was soft and cool. The air was thin, but breathable. The crystal pulsed ahead.

Arthur walked up to it. Stopped. Looked at his reflection in its transparent facets. He was pale, serious.

"I wanted to change one day," he said. "1989, Berlin. I want to erase my laughter at Klaus."

The crystal shimmered. Arthur felt something change inside him — as if time had slowed.

But at that moment, he heard Klaus's voice — not in reality, but inside himself.

"You shouldn't erase that laughter, Arthur. That laughter was sincere. And it made me the person I became. Without it, I wouldn't have left the intelligence service. And I wouldn't have met you again and be saving this world right now."

Arthur hesitated.

"You weren't laughing at me," Klaus's voice continued. "You were laughing at the situation. And that was right. Sometimes laughter is the only thing that saves us from going crazy."

Arthur lowered his hand.

"I can't do it," he said aloud. "I can't erase that day. Because it's part of me. Part of all of us. The past is not a mistake. It is experience."

"Then what do you want to change?" the Crystal asked in a voice like the rustling of wind.

Arthur thought. He remembered everything — the strudel in Berlin, the laughter, Earth, Mila, Klaus, Svetozorov, Lida, Dmitry Arkadyevich, Sergey Ivanovich, the blue tea on Andromeda Bun, singing into the scanners, the chase by the black hole, the philosophical conversations in space. And Vera.

He took her book from his pocket. Opened it to the first page, and words appeared. They emerged right before his eyes:

"You already know the answer. Just believe in it."

Arthur smiled and turned to the Crystal.

"I want everyone to have a chance for a new choice. So that no one is tied to what they did in the past. So that we can make mistakes and forgive ourselves. And so that Earth becomes real. Not an experiment. Just a home."

The Crystal shone brightly, and light enveloped Arthur. He felt his desire weave into the fabric of the Universe. Something changed. Somewhere, perhaps at the very beginning, a thin thread of reality intertwined differently...

"Thank you," he said

Chapter 7. Con Calme. On Earth

Moscow. Arthur's Office. A Week Later

Arthur sat in his office. On the table stood a mug with the inscription "WHAT IF?" Next to it lay the old map with the island. It was no longer needed, but Arthur couldn't throw it away. Too many memories.

Mila entered. She was in her diplomatic suit, but without shoes — she had changed into house slippers because she was tired of heels.

"Do you miss space?" she asked.

"Sometimes," Arthur replied. "But here isn't bad either. There's tea, dumplings, and you."

"And Dmitry Arkadyevich?"

"Yes, Dmitry Arkadyevich got a job in my office. He manages the meeting schedule. He says it's almost like MTC, just without space. He likes it."

"And Klaus?"

"He returned to intelligence. He said he'd never lose his keys again."

"And Sergey Ivanovich?"

"He's still working at the space station. He likes it."

Mila smiled.

"And Svetozorov?"

"Svetozorov made a big report on corruption in MTC. Everyone's watching. Many believe it. Many don't. But his ratings have gone up. Lida works with him. She says he's too loud, and she loves him."

"And what about Gennady Petrovich?" Mila asked.

Arthur smirked, pulling a printout from his desk drawer.

"He was transferred to the archives department. Now he's in charge of storing old documents on planet K-3. There's no space, no internet, not even decent coffee."

"And he's still trying to get 'Fair Wind' back?"

"Every morning he sends me a letter," Arthur gestured to a stack of papers. "Demanding the return of 'MTC property.' And every morning I send him a bureaucratic reply — one that he himself would be proud of: 'Your request is being processed. Estimated processing time — 374 years.'" He shrugged. "I thought it was polite."

"And what's he doing now?"

"He was last seen in the cafeteria on K-3. He sat alone, drinking instant coffee, which he called the 'drink of the future.' But I heard he's trying to write his memoirs."

"Memoirs?"

"Yes. Called 'How I Could Have Saved the Galaxy If I Hadn't Been Betrayed.'"

Mila burst out laughing.

"Seriously?"

"Absolutely. They say he's already written three chapters. In them, he's the main hero, and we're the secondary villains."

"Well, let him write," said Mila. "Everyone needs a hobby."

"Exactly," Arthur nodded. "I'm even thinking of buying a copy. For laughs."

"Remember that woman on Andromeda Bun?" Mila asked.

Arthur fell silent. He looked at the wall where the display board hung with photos of undercover intelligence officers. Among them — a young blonde with serious grey eyes.

"Vera?" he repeated. "Of course, I remember."

"I couldn't find any information about her," said Mila. "I checked all MTC databases. There isn't a single employee with that name. Not a consultant, not an intelligence officer, no one."

Arthur smirked.

"She said: 'If you need me — I'll find you myself.' Maybe she never existed at all. Maybe she was — like my mug. A sign. Or a premonition."

Arthur took out the book from his desk drawer — the only proof that she was real.

He looked out the window. Outside was Moscow. Real, alive, glowing with lights.

"Maybe she's a guardian angel for intelligence officers," Mila smiled.

"Well, let's say," said Arthur and smiled back.

Arthur walked to the window and looked out at the city. Moscow glowed with lights, the avenue hummed below, someone played guitar in the courtyard.

"Are you happy?" Mila asked.

"I'm not sure happiness is something that can be measured," Arthur replied. "But I am happy."

He picked up the mug and raised it to his lips.

"What if it wasn't all in vain?" he asked.

Mila looked at him and smiled.

"We've already answered that question," she said. "Remember?"

Arthur smiled.

"Yes," he said, holding back a smile like an intelligence officer. "I remember how we saved Earth — almost by accident..."

Dmitry Arkadyevich entered with his tablet.

"Arthur, your schedule for tomorrow includes a meeting at 10:00, lunch at 13:00, and an unexpected visit from Gennady Petrovich at 16:00."

"Is he coming here?"

"Yes. He wants to personally discuss the return of 'Fair Wind.' I said you were busy, but he insists. Now I love unforeseen circumstances. They make the schedule come alive."

Everyone laughed.

Arthur walked over to the windowsill where his favorite portable electric stove stood, and took the lid off the pot. Steam rose to the ceiling. Inside floated dumplings. They didn't glow like on Andromeda Bun, but they smelled so delicious that Mila and Dmitry Arkadyevich's stomachs growled.

"These are mine," said Arthur. "Homemade. With mince and onions. No quantum additives."

"The best dumplings in the Universe," said Mila.

"Well, let's say," Arthur smiled.

"We saved our planet and the whole galaxy," said Arthur, "and I still haven't sung 'We are the Champions' at karaoke."

"You haven't sung it?" Mila was surprised.

"I didn't have time. I was waiting for you. Let's fix that today. Right now."

He turned on the music and began to sing. Mila joined in. Even Dmitry Arkadyevich picked up on the first chorus.

We Are the Champions, Queen (1977)

I've paid my dues
Time after time
I've done my sentence
But committed no crime
And bad mistakes
I've made a few
I've had my share of sand kicked in my face
But I've come through (and I mean to go on, and on, and on, and on)

Chorus:

We are the champions, my friends
And we'll keep on fighting 'til the end
We are the champions, we are the champions
No time for losers
'Cause we are the champions
Of the world

I've taken my bows
And my curtain calls
You brought me fame and fortune and everything that goes with it
I thank you all
But it's been no bed of roses
No pleasure cruise
I consider it a challenge before the whole human race
And I ain't gonna lose (and I mean to go on, and on, and on, and on)

Chorus 2x

"I've recorded this in the schedule," he said after the song ended. "Item: 'Karaoke as Soul Salvation.'"

A voice came from the corridor:

"Can I join too?"

Everyone turned around. Anna was standing in the doorway, holding a mug of tea and smiling.

"I thought you stayed at the station," said Arthur.

"I'm always where I'm needed," she replied.

Everyone laughed.

Arthur looked out the window. Outside was Moscow. Real, alive, glowing with lights. And in it lived people who didn't know that someone had once rewritten the Universe for them. But they didn't need to know. They just needed to live, love, eat dumplings, and listen to music...

Arthur put the mug down on the table. The inscription "WHAT IF?" looked back at him.

He turned the mug over. On the bottom was written: "YES". And it wasn't an answer — it was a question he had finally decided to ask himself. Outside the window, Moscow hummed quietly. Arthur closed his eyes. And smiled ...

the end

Epilogue. Where Stars Begin

Somewhere in space. A ship with no name

Vera sat at the helm and drank blue tea. On the control panel blinked the inscription: "Next destination: sector G-17, planet 42-B." She smiled, took a sip, and entered the coordinates.

"Good job, Arthur," she said aloud. "A very good job."

She turned off the tea, tightened her straps, and started the engines.

The ship disappeared into hyperspace. On the back seat lay a stack of books. The first was called: *"The Woman Who Could Keep Secrets."* The second was still untitled. Vera had written it on the Island while waiting for Arthur. She knew he would succeed.

She knew everything...

Moscow. Arthur's Office

Anna sat in Arthur's empty office. On the table lay the map of the Island. She turned it over and wrote in small letters on the back:

"You did it, Arthur. I knew you would. From the very beginning. You don't know it yet, but this is not the last time you'll rewrite reality..."

She smiled and walked out, leaving the door open...

Acknowledgments

Thank you to everyone who believes in miracles. Especially to those who create them every day — simply by smiling, hugging, and saying: "Well, let's say."

This book is about you. And for you.

And, of course, thank you to Douglas Adams, who taught us not to panic, even when the Universe decides to rewrite itself.

Special thanks to Vera. Wherever she is.

P.S.: If you've read to the end — it means you're also part of this story.

For Scouts' Notes and Beyond

You can write down your thoughts, ideas, top-secret codes, and coordinates of important planets here

For Scouts' Notes and Beyond

You can write down your thoughts, ideas, names of enemies, passwords and reviews, codes and coordinates. Or just draw stars. Or write down recipes for treats. After all, this is a place for what you consider important. Even if it's just an item on your to-do list: "Feed the kitten from the neighboring yard" or "Save our galaxy"