

BOOK 8

SQUIGGLE AND THE STAR OF OMEGA CENTAURI



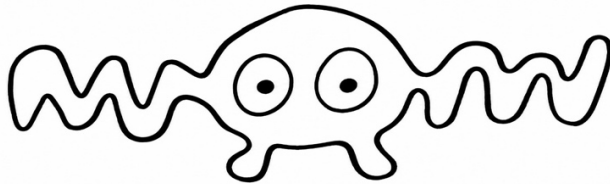
Christopher Smythies

Book 8

SQUIGGLE

and the

STAR OF OMEGA CENTAURI



By Christopher Smythies

Chapter 1

I am Squiggle the Photon, born from the fusion of two hydrogen atoms in the galaxy NGC 3972 66 million years ago, traveler to the Milky Way, and resident at Goldendale Sky Village. Rachel is my human companion, the villagers are my friends, and the L-HOP is my home.

While Goldendale Sky Village is well known for its fine weather and clear skies, there are times when a cold front rolls in from the Pacific Ocean, bringing with it clouds and precipitation. On one of these occasions, Rachel and I were sheltering in the L-HOP, listening to the sound of rain pitter-pattering on the metal roof.

"I wish I were vacationing at some beautiful tropical resort right now," said Rachel as she watched raindrops streaming down the windows.

"Maybe I can make your wish come true," I said, reaching for a brochure lying on a nearby table. I opened it and began to read. "'Welcome to the Excelsior Intergalactica Resort. Located on Planet Corona in the heart of the famous globular star cluster Omega Centauri, the Excelsior Intergalactica is the Milky Way's most celebrated luxury resort.'"

"Isn't that the place where you visited in the middle of the Gravity Games?" asked Rachel.

"That's right," I answered, "although I wasn't exactly on vacation. Listen to this: 'Planet Corona's many moons produce spectacular solar eclipses almost every day, each announced in advance so that guests may gather on the Eclipse Terrace to watch. At night, they can gaze at a sky crowded with millions of ancient suns. When they are not being treated to breathtaking celestial shows, guests can relax on the beach or by the pool and have their every whim catered to by the resort's professional staff. Indulge yourself with luxury. Marvel at the eclipses. Remember us for the stars.' Sounds pretty nice, don't you think?"

"Sounds expensive," Rachel answered.

"I'm sure it is," I agreed, "unless you happen to have a complimentary stay for two."

Rachel almost choked. "And you do?"

"Yes! It arrived in the mail today. Sent by Squirm along with a note thanking me."

"For what?"

"For all the business I brought Squirm's Worms Inc. when I traveled back in time to the Big Bang."

"Wow! That was very kind of him."

"Ever since his worms dug the thousands of wormholes required for that trip, he says Big Bang tourism has been booming. People can't get enough of quarks and gluons. Would you like to go with me?"

"I'd love to!" cried Rachel. "Thank you!"

When I called Squirm to arrange our wormhole transportation, he had something extra up his sleeve.

“You’re in luck,” he said. “If you go now, you’ll catch a very special exhibition the resort is putting on. The Star of Omega Centauri is on display to the public for the first time in years.”

“What’s that?” I asked, puzzled.

“It’s the largest diamond in the Milky Way. Weighs in at over one thousand carats. An incredible jewel, I hear. You mustn’t miss it.”

“I can’t wait!” I said. “Thanks, Squirm, for making this trip possible!”

“Thanks to you for using my wormholes. Get ready for the vacation of a lifetime, and don’t forget to pack your sunscreen.”

Chapter 2

When Rachel and I stepped out of our wormhole, roller bags in tow behind us, we were expecting to see the entrance of the luxurious 10-million-star Excelsior Intergalactica Resort in front of us. Instead, we were standing in a busy wormhole terminal that reminded me of Clapham Junction—only this place was much bigger and even more chaotic. We were surrounded by giant blocks of steel and concrete that were perforated with hundreds of wormholes of various sizes and looked like slabs of Swiss cheese. The holes were constantly opening and closing, disgorging fresh crowds of travelers before swallowing up those who were leaving. Thousands of people were walking up and down concourses, towing their own roller bags behind them while focusing their attention on information boards that were being updated every minute. Somewhere above the commotion, a loudspeaker announced that United Wormlines service #567 to the Andromeda Galaxy had been delayed due to “unexpected space traffic congestion.”

“This doesn’t look like a luxury resort to me,” said Rachel as she looked around.

“Do you suppose Squirm connected our wormhole to the wrong galaxy?” I said, with a sinking feeling.

“I wouldn’t be surprised if he did.”

Our worries deepened when, a few minutes later, we walked past the terminal’s customer service center. The lines of people waiting for assistance at the United Wormlines and Interstellar Wormways counters were short, whereas the one at the Squirm’s Worms counter crossed the entire terminal and went out the exit.

“There’s Lost and Found,” I said, spotting another counter ahead. Behind it, in a large storage area, were rows of shelves full of everyday items that people had left behind in their haste to reach their destinations. “I’ll ask them where we are.”

“Squiggle!” Rachel suddenly exclaimed, staring into the storage area. “Is that . . . Is that a *monolith*?”

I followed her pointing finger, and saw what she was talking about. At the back, standing against a wall, was a rectangular block of black metal at least 12 feet high. It looked just like the one I had seen at GSV the morning after my first star party there.

“You’re right! It is!”

“See the identification number painted on it? Looks like B 3405-2.”

I peered closer, and said, “That’s the one that was supposed to go to a planet in the Sombrero Galaxy, and ended up on Earth by mistake. Now it’s here. We’ll have to tell Squirm we found it. He’ll be happy about that.”

We asked the bored-looking young woman behind the counter what she knew about the monolith—how long it had been here, where it had come from, and so on—but she couldn’t give us very much information. She did make it clear, however, that it was taking up a lot of space and she wanted its owner to hurry up and claim it. Her attitude might have been more respectful had she known that the monolith possessed the power to create civilizations.

Our next questions were more easily answered. Yes, our wormhole had brought us to the right place. We were standing in the Corona Wormhole Terminal on Planet Corona and the Excelsior Intergalactica Resort was only a few miles away. We had just missed a solar eclipse, but no worries—there would be another one tomorrow. In the meantime, she told us to be sure to visit the Star of Omega Centauri exhibition. There wouldn’t be another of *those* for ten years.

We thanked her for helping us and assured her that a worm with four arms would be coming shortly to claim the monolith. Without further explanation, we grabbed our roller bags and headed for the exit.

Chapter 3

Outside the wormhole terminal, Rachel and I were greeted by clear blue skies and brilliant sunlight. While only one sun illuminated Planet Corona during the daytime, we could see hundreds of other, fainter points of light scattered about. These were the stars of the globular cluster—bright enough to be seen during the day, but not enough to spoil the views at night. A gentle tropical breeze rustled through palm trees above us and carried the scent of the sea. Like any major transportation center, people were constantly arriving and departing in cars, taxis, and buses. We hired a taxi and asked to be driven to the Excelsior Intergalactica.

The farther we traveled from the terminal, the more beautiful the surroundings became. Crowded buildings gave way to groves of palm trees, brilliant tropical flowers, and long stretches of dazzling white sand. Beyond them, a turquoise sea sparkled in the sunlight, breaking against coral reefs in the distance. Small islands dotted the horizon, and elegant sailboats glided across the water beneath billowing white sails.

Our road climbed gradually into the hills, winding along cliffs that overlooked the sea. When we rounded the final bend, the Excelsior Intergalactica came into view. The enormous resort stood on a headland above a sweeping crescent-shaped beach, its white towers rising above acres of gardens, fountains, and aquamarine swimming pools. Palm trees swayed along the shore, and waterfalls tumbled from one pool into another before disappearing over the edge of the cliff.

Rachel stared through the taxi window. “Now *that* looks like a 10-million-star resort,” she said.

Our taxi began to slow long before we reached the hotel entrance. The driveway was blocked by a security checkpoint, where uniformed guards were inspecting every vehicle. Tall

metal barriers surrounded the grounds, cameras watched from the tops of palm trees, and drones buzzed overhead. Even the underside of our taxi was examined with a mirror at the end of a long pole before we were allowed to proceed.

“What’s all this about?” Rachel asked.

“The most valuable jewel in the galaxy—the Star of Omega Centauri—is being displayed at the hotel this week,” said our driver. “Every jewel thief in the galaxy must be trying to get inside. Nobody’s taking any chances.”

At the entrance, our bags were unloaded and passed through a gigantic scanning machine. Rachel walked through a metal detector without incident, but when I tried to follow her, alarms rang and red lights flashed. A male and a female guard looked at each other as if trying to decide which of them should search me. The female guard eventually shrugged, sauntered over, and patted me down. When she didn’t find anything suspicious, she allowed me to pass.

We checked in at the front desk and took an elevator to the top floor of one of the hotel’s towers. Our room looked like a royal suite, with marble floors, king-sized beds, and tall glass doors opening onto a balcony overlooking the sea. The day was drawing to a close and the sun was sinking lower in the sky. Far below us, waves rolled onto the crescent-shaped beach, while sunbathers weren beginning to pack up their things and return to their rooms. We spotted a parasailer being towed behind a motor boat in the distance and watched for some time before we realized a *Tyrannosaurus rex*, and not a human being, was suspended beneath the parachute-like canopy. He was wearing a baggy bathing suit, and looked as if he was enjoying himself immensely. How he managed to stay up in the air, weighing as much as he did, was a mystery.

After unpacking, we went down to a restaurant beside one of the swimming pools, where Rachel ate dinner. Since photons don’t eat, I simply watched and made pleasant conversation. By the time we finished, the sun had sunk beneath the horizon, turning the sky first gold, then crimson, and finally deep purple. Lanterns began to glow along the pathways as Rachel and I walked down to the beach.

The stars we had seen faintly shining through the blue sky earlier in the day were becoming brighter by the minute. Soon, hundreds of them were blazing overhead. Thousands more appeared between them until the entire sky seemed to sparkle. There were so many stars, they cast faint shadows across the sand.

Rachel reclined on a lounge chair and gazed upward. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen anything so beautiful,” she said.

Neither had I.

We remained on the beach until late in the evening, talking about the Star of Omega Centauri and wondering what a diamond famous throughout the galaxy might look like. Eventually, spellbound by the peaceful ambience, we returned to our room. Rachel climbed into bed and was asleep within minutes.

I went back out onto the balcony. Photons don’t sleep, and with a night sky like that above me, I wouldn’t have wanted to anyway.

Chapter 4

The next day, Rachel and I headed over to the resort’s Exhibition Hall where the Star of Omega Centauri was. Outside, security was extremely tight, with watchful guards keeping a

close eye on the long line of visitors waiting to enter. We joined the end of the line, and I began reading aloud to Rachel from a brochure I had picked up at the hotel's reception desk.

"The Star of Omega Centauri was discovered in the ancient diamond mines of Planet Corona approximately one million years ago. In its rough form, it weighed more than two thousand carats. Ten thousand years ago, it was cut and polished into the magnificent jewel seen today. The diamond belongs to Corona's ruling royal family and is normally kept under the strictest security in a bank vault. It is displayed to the public only once every ten years and has never been permitted to leave Omega Centauri. The Star is famous not only for its extraordinary size, but also for its unusual internal structure. When light passes through the diamond, thousands of tiny points appear deep inside it, creating the illusion of the globular star cluster Omega Centauri trapped within the stone."

By the time I had finished reading, we had reached the security checkpoint. Rachel was required to empty her pockets *and* pass through three separate scanners. The guards looked rather puzzled when it was my turn.

"What exactly are you?" one of them asked.

"A photon," I replied.

The guard glanced down at his list of prohibited items. Apparently, photons were not on it, so he waved me through.

Beyond the checkpoint, a steel vault door opened into a darkened hall. At its center, surrounded by security guards and protected by a thick glass case, I saw the Star of Omega Centauri. Brilliant beams of white light shone upon the diamond from several directions. The thousands of tiny points of light mentioned by the brochure were plainly visible, and the surreal sight of a globular star cluster inside a diamond sent waves of tingling across my skin.

"It's beautiful," I whispered, awestruck.

"Yes, it is!" said Rachel.

When I finally could tear my eyes away from the diamond, I noticed a multitude of security measures in place. Its glass case stood on a solid stone pedestal and was protected by pressure sensors, motion detectors, and a web of invisible laser beams. Even the slightest attempt to touch or move the diamond would trigger alarms throughout the building and seal every exit.

"With security like that," I muttered, "nobody could possibly steal it."

After taking one last look at the Star, Rachel and I reluctantly made our way toward the exit. We were both stunned by what we had seen. Before we were allowed to leave, however, a guard directed us through yet another scanner.

"What is this one for?" asked Rachel impatiently.

"It's a diamond detector," the guard explained, "tuned to recognize the unique internal carbon structure of diamonds."

"But how could anyone possibly remove it from that case?" I asked.

The guard smiled. "We don't take chances."

Rachel stepped through the scanner first, followed by me. Neither of us set off the alarm, and yet another steel vault door opened to let us out.

Outside, the warm sunshine seemed especially bright after the darkness of Exhibition Hall. We crossed the plaza and sat down on a bench in front of several fountains, where columns of sparkling water rose high into the air before splashing back into the pools below.

"I don't think anything we see on this vacation will be more impressive than that diamond," said Rachel.

"I was thinking exactly the same thing," I replied.

High above us, the sun continued to shine brightly in a perfectly clear sky. But not for much longer. One of Planet Corona's many moons was about to pass in front of it, blocking its light and resulting in a total eclipse. While Rachel and I had agreed that the highlight of our trip was already behind us, we were about to find out otherwise.

Chapter 5

As the eclipse approached, the first thing we noticed was the growing number of people gathering on the Eclipse Terrace in front of Exhibition Hall. Some carried cameras mounted on tripods, while others set up small telescopes and aimed them directly at the Sun.

"Isn't that dangerous?" I asked a young woman who was peering through a red telescope. "I thought you were never supposed to look at the Sun through a telescope."

"Not through an ordinary telescope," she replied. "That could blind you almost instantly. This is a special hydrogen-alpha solar telescope. Its filters block nearly all of the Sun's light and heat, allowing only a narrow band of safe, red light to reach your eye. Would you like to take a look?"

"Yes, please!"

"I'm Rose, by the way."

"And I'm Squiggle. This is my friend Rachel." I looked through the eyepiece and the dazzling Sun was transformed into a perfectly round orange disk with a big black bite taken out of it. Great arches of glowing gas rose above its surface, held aloft by huge loops of magnetic force. Some curved back toward the Sun, while others stretched tens of thousands of miles into space. They reminded me of the time, 66 million years ago, when I scrambled like a sea turtle to the surface of my birth star and leapt into space. "Look for the red flames around the edges!" I said, stepping away to let Rachel have a look.

"They're called solar prominences," said Rose. "They're loops of electrically charged gas, or plasma, held above the Sun's surface by magnetic fields. Sometimes those fields become tangled and suddenly release tremendous amounts of energy. That produces a solar flare, which can heat solar material to millions of degrees. Sometimes an eruption also hurls billions of tons of plasma far into space. The largest prominences can easily dwarf Planet Corona."

"Are those sunspots I'm seeing near the center?" asked Rachel, twiddling the focus knob.

"Yes," answered Rose. "They're cooler regions on the Sun's surface caused by powerful magnetic fields. They appear dark only because the rest of the Sun is so much hotter and brighter. A large group of sunspots can last for days or even weeks as the Sun slowly rotates."

"The Sun is now ninety percent covered," the loudspeaker announced. "Please keep your eclipse glasses on. It is not yet safe to look directly at the Sun."

Soon, only a thin crescent of the Sun remained, and at last I began to notice the daylight fading. The colors of the flowers became less vivid, the turquoise sea darkened, and the shadows around us took on a strange metallic-gray appearance. The air temperature quickly fell and the tropical breeze became uncomfortably cold. All around us, the excitement was growing. People

checked their cameras, adjusted their telescopes, and called to one another. Every few seconds, someone announced the percentage of the Sun that was covered.

“Ninety-five percent!”

“Ninety-seven!”

“Ninety-nine!”

The remaining crescent of sunlight became thinner and thinner. Beneath the palm trees, hundreds of tiny crescents appeared on the ground. The narrow gaps between the overlapping leaves were acting like pinhole cameras, each one projecting its own miniature image of the eclipsed Sun. The sky deepened from blue to violet.

Then the loudspeaker called out, “The shadow of the Moon is approaching!”

A vast shadow raced toward us across the sea. It swept over the distant islands and rushed toward the resort with astonishing speed. Along the horizon, the remaining daylight glowed orange, like a sunset in every direction.

Looking up, we saw the final crescent of sunlight break into a string of brilliant dots. Mountains and valleys along the edge of the Moon allowed the last rays to shine through. These were Baily’s Beads, named after the Earth astronomer Francis Baily, who famously described them almost two hundred years ago.

One by one, the beads vanished until only a single brilliant point remained. Around the Moon’s black silhouette, a delicate silver halo was beginning to appear. For one breathtaking moment, it looked like an enormous celestial diamond set into a glowing ring.

“The diamond ring!” Rachel cried.

The final point of sunlight vanished.

“Totality!” shouted the voice over the loudspeaker. “You may now remove your eclipse glasses!”

The Sun itself was gone. In its place hung a perfectly black circle surrounded by the magnificent pearly-white corona—the Sun’s outer atmosphere. Long streamers of glowing gas stretched millions of miles into space, shaped by magnetic fields that were normally hidden by the brilliant solar surface. Along one edge of the Moon, several prominences glowed ruby red. The stars that had been visible during the day became brighter, and hundreds more appeared around them until the darkened sky was filled with the glittering stars of Omega Centauri.

The sight of the eclipse was truly magical and different people reacted in different ways. Some simply stood looking upwards in silent awe, their camera equipment completely forgotten. Others whooped and hollered, expressing their amazement as noisily as possible. Rachel stared in disbelief, unable to find the words to express how she felt. I reacted in a way that only a photon could really understand: my wiggles unwiggled and became as straight as laser beams.

For a few extraordinary minutes, the entire Excelsior Intergalactica Resort was cheering ized. Thousands of people from hundreds of planets stood together in the shadow of the Moon, watching a performance of Nature that daylight ordinarily kept concealed. For those brief moments, they became one in thought, mind, and spirit.

And while every eye was enraptured by the spectacle in the sky, nobody—*absolutely nobody*—was watching the Star of Omega Centauri.

Chapter 6

The eclipse lasted 6 minutes and 10 seconds. When the first sliver of sunlight emerged from behind the Moon, the corona disappeared and the spell was broken. People began cheering, clapping, and babbling excitedly, sharing their feelings with anybody who would listen. Cameras were removed from tripods, solar telescopes were packed into cases, and families started drifting back toward the hotel. Rachel and I remained on the Eclipse Terrace, still overwhelmed by what we had seen.

At last, Rachel spoke. “That was the most beautiful thing I’ve ever—“ Before she could finish her sentence, the doors of the exhibition hall flew open and a woman came running outside. Her face was white with terror.

“It’s gone!” she screamed. “The Star of Omega Centauri is *gone*!”

Everybody froze. A few seconds later, alarms exploded into life, and guards sealed off every possible way to leave the area.

“Attention! Attention!” announced a voice over the loudspeakers. “The Excelsior Intergalactica Resort is now under a Code Red security lockdown. All guests and visitors must remain where they are. No one is permitted to leave the area until further notice!”

More guards appeared from nowhere and told the confused and frightened crowd that everyone would have to walk through the exhibit’s diamond detector before being allowed to return to the hotel. A long line quickly formed, and those wearing engagement rings were asked to remove them before they were beckoned forward. Whenever the detector sounded an alarm, bags were opened, pockets were emptied, and clothing was patted down. Even shoes were removed and examined.

But no diamond was found.

Hours later, Rachel and I were given permission to return to our room.

“The thieves must have planned this very carefully,” I said, turning on the television. “They deliberately stole it during the eclipse when everybody was outside, preoccupied with the sky.”

“Even so,” said Rachel, sitting on her bed, “how did they get past the inner layers of security? That diamond was the best protected jewel in the galaxy.”

A smartly dressed, blond-haired female reporter appeared on the screen and addressed the camera.

“We are reporting live from the Excelsior Intergalactica Resort,” she said, “where the priceless Star of Omega Centauri disappeared earlier today during the total solar eclipse.

“Security officials have confirmed that the diamond’s display case is still sealed. Its thick glass has not been broken or damaged, and the locking mechanism shows no signs of having been forced or tampered with. Even more remarkably, the velvet cushion on which the diamond had been resting remains exactly where it was before the eclipse.

“Every guest, visitor, and member of staff has been searched, but the missing diamond has not been found. Investigators have so far offered no explanation for how anyone could have removed it from a locked and undamaged case. It appears that the most precious jewel in the galaxy has simply vanished into thin air. This is Melanie Gibson, reporting live from the Excelsior Intergalactica Resort. Back to the studio.”

When the news anchor appeared, he looked pale and grim. “We have just received news of an extraordinary new development. Let’s go straight to Margaret Johnson, who is reporting from the Corona Wormhole Terminal. Margaret?”

The picture changed to show a woman standing outside the enormous terminal Rachel and I had passed through the previous day. Behind her, its main floor was packed with travelers standing around and not going anywhere.

“Thank you,” she said, lifting her mike up to her mouth. “For the first time in its history, the Corona Wormhole Administration has suspended all wormhole transportation in and around Omega Centauri. Every route into or out of the globular cluster has been closed until further notice.

“Travelers currently inside a wormhole have been instructed to leave through the nearest available exit, while everyone else has been warned not to enter one. All passengers are advised to remain where they are and await further instructions.

“The terminal behind me, normally one of the busiest transportation centers in the galaxy, has been brought to a complete standstill. Every arrival and departure has been canceled, leaving thousands of travelers stranded. Officials have not said how long the shutdown will last, but it is widely believed that the extraordinary measure is intended to prevent whoever stole the Star of Omega Centauri from escaping with it.

“This is Margaret Johnson, reporting live from the Corona Wormhole Terminal. Back to the studio.”

“This is insane,” said Rachel without taking her eyes off the TV screen. “This incident has effectively shut down this sector of the galaxy. Can you imagine the massive disruption it’ll cause?”

“And all for nothing,” I said quietly.

Rachel looked away from the TV and at me instead. “What do you mean by that?” she asked.

“This entire security operation is a complete waste of time.”

“How can you say that?”

“Because I have a pretty good idea what happened to the Star of Omega Centauri.”

“You do? What?”

“I’ll explain everything to you as soon as I can. First, though, I have to make a phone call. We have no time to lose.”

I picked up the phone and dialed a number that, by now, I had learned by heart.

Chapter 7

Millions of light-years away, Mrs. Boggle was standing in her kitchen, heating a saucepan of tomato soup. She was a formidable woman with half-moon glasses perched on the end of her nose and short curls of hair arranged in tight spirals around her head. She wore a flowered dress, sensible shoes, and a white apron bearing the words

YOU SAY TOMATO

I SAY GET OUT OF MY KITCHEN

When the soup began to boil, she poured it into a bowl almost to the brim. Then she carried it carefully to the kitchen table, set it down on a place mat, and went to fetch a spoon.

When she returned, she stopped.

The level of soup in the bowl had risen significantly. Some of it was now running over the rim and dripping onto her nice, clean tablecloth.

Mrs. Boggle frowned.

"I don't remember pouring that much."

She sat down, tucked a napkin beneath her chin, and picked up her spoon. The moment she plunged it into the soup, it struck something hard.

Clink!

Mrs. Boggle tried again.

Clink! Clink!

She stirred the soup suspiciously. Something large and hard was resting at the bottom of the bowl. Sliding her spoon underneath it, she slowly lifted it toward the surface.

The largest diamond she had ever seen rose out of the tomato soup. It was almost as large as her fist, with hundreds of perfectly cut surfaces that sparkled brilliantly beneath the kitchen lights. Thick red soup streamed down its sides and dripped back into the bowl.

Mrs. Boggle stared at it over the top of her half-moon glasses, and was not impressed.

"Oh, for heaven's sake! Not again!"

Using her napkin, she picked up the diamond and carried it across the room. She placed it on the mantelpiece beside an urn containing the ashes of her late husband, Harold. During their forty-three years of marriage, Harold had rarely gone anywhere, preferring to spend his days sitting on the couch and watching football.

"There you are," she said. "You can keep Harold company until I find out who you belong to." Then she marched into the hallway, picked up the telephone, and dialed Squirm's Worms Inc.

Squirm answered with his usual cheerful voice. "Squirm's Worms," he said. "How may I help you?"

"Squirm!"

"Mrs. Babble?"

"Don't you 'Babble' me! My name's Boggle, and I'm calling to inform you that another object has accidentally come through one of your wretched wormholes again."

Squirm sighed. "What is it this time?"

"A diamond."

"A diamond? Big one?"

"Biggest I've ever seen. Found it in my soup. I put it on my mantelpiece. What do you want me to do with it?"

There was a long silence before Squirm spoke again. "That must be the Star of Omega Centauri," he said. "The news is full of reports that it disappeared during a recent solar eclipse on Planet Corona. More likely it was a wormhole malfunction. They have been known to occur more often during solar eclipses. I wonder how it got to your place."

“This is *very* inconvenient, you know,” said Mrs. Boggle. “I’m going to file a complaint. Only this time, I expect consequences.”

“I’m so sorry about this, Mrs. Bobble,” said Squirm, sounding truly sorry. “There’ll be an investigation, of course. But the most important thing right now is to return the diamond to its rightful owners, with the minimum of inconvenience to you. Can I arrange for a wormhole to transport it from your mantelpiece back to the resort? Two friends of mine—Squiggle and Rachel—are there right now. They can collect it at the other end and return it safely to the authorities.”

“You’d better not get tomato soup on my carpet.”

“I promise I won’t.”

Still clutching the receiver, Mrs. Boggle marched back into the kitchen. A small wormhole opened above the mantelpiece. The diamond trembled slightly but remained where it was. Harold’s urn, on the other hand, rose into the air.

“Wrong one!” shouted Mrs. Boggle, lunging forward.

The urn vanished.

Mrs. Boggle stared at the empty space beside the diamond. “Squirm,” she said very quietly.

“Yes, Mrs. Bubble?”

“Where have you sent my husband?”

Chapter 8

The Code Red security lockdown made it very difficult to place a telephone call from the hotel room. When I was finally able to reach Squirm, I was relieved to learn that he had found the Star of Omega Centauri and was already making arrangements to return it. I had suspected that a wormhole had swallowed the diamond during the eclipse, but even I hadn’t expected it to turn up in somebody’s tomato soup. He said something about Harold’s ashes and a certain Mrs. Bungle although I didn’t entirely understand what one had to do with the other. He assured me that he was personally coming to Planet Corona and would explain everything when he arrived. He was traveling through the same wormhole he had used during the Gravity Games, which meant that Rachel and I would have to meet him on the beach. He assured us it wouldn’t take him long to get there.

When we reached the beach, we found it deserted. In the distance, I spotted a small object sitting on the sand, so we walked over to investigate. It was an urn with the name “Harold” engraved on the front. This must have been what Squirm had mentioned over the telephone. Rachel picked it up and held it tightly so she wouldn’t drop it.

We didn’t have to wait long before a wormhole opened and out came Squirm wearing dark glasses and carrying a colorful beach umbrella. He greeted us warmly, then took out a bottle of sunscreen. He was just about to slap some on when a second wormhole opened and a person I assumed to be Mrs. Bungle appeared. She had also brought an umbrella, but hers was black and

was intended for rain. When she saw Squirm, she marched over to him, raised her umbrella into the air, and tried to clobber him with it.

She missed by a mile.

“Squirm’s Worms is the worst business I’ve ever had to deal with!” she yelled, threatening Squirm with the umbrella. “You’re always delivering your customers to the wrong end of the universe. Nothing is ever on time. I can’t count how many times you’ve lost my things. And now this! When you’re not supposed to touch the Star of Omega Centauri, you suck it into one of your wormholes. And when you *are* supposed to suck it in, you take my husband instead! Where is he anyway?”

Rachel stepped gingerly forward. “Here he is, ma’am,” she said, holding out the urn. “Sorry for your loss.”

Mrs. Boggle grabbed the urn and dropped it into a bag she was carrying. Then she took out the diamond everyone was so concerned about and held it high. “Who wants this stupid rock?” she asked.

The Star of Omega Centauri flashed beautifully in the sunlight. Once again, the thousand points of light inside were plainly visible.

Rachel took it from her. “Thank you for bringing it back to where it belongs. I’m sure the—“

“As for you, Squirm—“

Squirm ducked behind his beach umbrella. “I’m terribly sorry about Harold’s ashes,” he said. “Perhaps there’s something I can do to make it up to you.”

“You’ve done quite enough damage already.”

“Did your husband enjoy traveling?”

Mrs. Boggle lowered her umbrella slightly. “He never traveled anywhere. Just sat on the couch all day and lay in bed all night. He was always saying he wanted to see the universe, but never did.”

“Then allow me to offer you our most exclusive memorial service,” said Squirm. “Completely free of charge.”

Mrs. Boggle regarded him suspiciously. “What kind of memorial service?”

“We’ll take Harold to the Corona Wormhole Terminal and put his ashes in the ‘Scatter Matter’ machine. They’ll be distributed to all the wormholes at the terminal and then sent throughout the universe. He’ll visit more planets, stars, and galaxies than any person who has ever lived.”

Mrs. Boggle’s expression softened.

“He would have loved that idea,” she said flatly.

Squirm emerged cautiously from behind his umbrella. “Then it’s settled,” he said. “Harold Bumble is about to become the most widely traveled man in history.”

Chapter 9

After the Star of Omega Centauri was returned to its velvet cushion in Exhibition Hall, Squirm, Mrs. Boggle, Rachel, and I went to the Corona Wormhole Terminal with Harold’s

ashes. By the time we arrived, the place was fully reopened and thousands of travelers were once again on the move. The first order of business was to dispatch Harold with as much respect as we could muster. We went to the basement of the building and gathered around the Scatter Matter machine. After Mrs. Boggle said a few words—something along the lines of “Harold always wanted to have his ashes scattered, though I doubt this is what he had in mind”—we opened the hatch and poured in the urn’s contents. Squirm mashed the big red SCATTER button. There was a whoosh, and Harold—or what was left of him—was off to see the universe.

While we were at the terminal, two other matters required attention. The monolith was still standing in the corner of the storage room at Lost and Found. Squirm was elated that we had found it and filled out the necessary paperwork to reclaim it. After that, we showed him the long line of people at the Squirm’s Worms customer service desk. To his credit, he excused himself, joined the beleaguered agent working there, and spent hours helping people sort out their travel troubles while Mrs. Boggle, Rachel, and I returned to the beach.

By the time Squirm returned from the terminal, the Sun was already sinking toward the horizon. His dark glasses were pushed up on top of his head, and he looked exhausted.

“Two hundred and seventeen complaints,” he said. “Every single one of them has now been resolved.”

“There’ll be twice as many tomorrow,” mumbled Mrs. Boggle.

Squirm took out his Wormhole Remote and began tapping carefully on its controls. “Mrs. Bimbo first,” he said.

A wormhole opened beside us. Inside, we could see Mrs. Boggle’s kitchen, exactly as she had left it. Her bowl of tomato soup was still sitting on the table.

Mrs. Boggle turned to Squirm and fixed him with a severe look. “If I ever find another diamond in my soup, you will be hearing from me. And the name is BOGGLE!” With that, she stepped through the wormhole and disappeared from sight.

“Next,” said Squirm, “Goldendale Sky Village.” He tapped several more buttons, paused to check them, and then checked them again. A second wormhole opened.

Through it, Rachel and I could see the familiar interior of L-HOP. We said our goodbyes and stepped through. A moment later, the wormhole closed behind us.

The rain had stopped while we were away. Rachel and I went outside and stood beneath the clearing sky. Below the southern horizon lay Omega Centauri, its ten million stars forever hidden from Goldendale Sky Village. Somewhere among them was Planet Corona, the Excelsior Intergalactica Resort, and the Star of Omega Centauri, sparkling once again upon its velvet cushion.

For the moment, at least, everything in the universe was exactly where it belonged.

THE END