

Sauiiggle

★ and the ★

MAGNIFICENT SEVEN

★ BOOK 3 ★



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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.

One day, I was sitting with Rachel in the L-HOP. The sun had set an hour before and it was already dark outside. A few red lights moved about the Portal—the sky villagers were starting the night’s observations. I heard an urgent knock at the door.

“Come in!” called Rachel.

The door flew open and a man with a mustache and a park ranger uniform hurried in. His worried eyes darted about. “I’m looking for Squiggle the Photon,” he said. “I was told I’d find him here.”

“I’m Squiggle,” I said.

The man fell into a camp chair Rachel offered him. “Thank goodness you’re here!” he said, removing his ranger hat and throwing it onto a small table next to him. Thick brown hair swept back from his forehead. “I’m Jack. They call me Flapjack because I love pancakes. I work at Goldendale Observatory State Park. Do you know it?”

“I do!” said Rachel. “Been there a few times to look through your telescope. A 24-inch reflector, isn’t it?”

“That’s right. The observatory was opened in 1973 and gets thousands of visitors every year. My job is to show them cool things about astronomy. They love it, coming back every year for more. Until recently.”

“What happened?”

“Skyglow happened.”

“What’s sky glow?”

“You mean *who’s* Skyglow. He’s an evil photon. Wouldn’t think twice about plucking out your wiggles. And the photons who hang out with him are just as bad. Every day after sunset, they raid the sky above our town and destroy its darkness. Deep-space photons like yourself are getting overwhelmed. It’s gotten so bad, I can hardly see galaxies through the telescope any longer. Tourists will start noticing soon. When they do, they’ll stay away. Can you help us, Squiggle? We’re desperate!”



Goldendale Observatory State Park

I looked out of the window in the direction of Goldendale. From where I sat, I could see a dome of light over the town—a bright glow caused by artificial light being scattered into the atmosphere. While it looked harmless enough from this distance, Flapjack was telling a much different story.

“Okay,” I said with a little bravado in my voice. If I’d had a chest, I might have puffed it out. “Go tell Skyglow and his thugs I’m coming, and Goldendale isn’t big enough for the both of us. He better clear out before I get there.”

Flapjack thanked me, then left, looking much relieved.

Rachel angrily turned to me. “Do you have any idea what you just did?”

“I . . . I offered to get rid of Skyglow,” I stammered, surprised at her tone.

“You? A tiny photon? Get rid of Skyglow? Just how do you propose to do that? He’s a vicious outlaw. You heard Flapjack. He’ll pluck out your wiggles!”

I felt queasy as if I’d just made a big mistake, and broke into a sweat. “Maybe I was a little too hasty,” I said. “I’m sure there must be a way to run him out of town.”

“Not by yourself, there isn’t.”

I thought about that for a moment. She was right. If I was going to take on Skyglow and his gang, I was going to need help. And not just any help. I needed the toughest photons in the universe. But where was I going to find them?

I had absolutely no idea.

Chapter 2

Later that night, I retreated to the Red Light Lounge to think. I sat at a table and buried my head in my wiggles.

“Can I get you something?”

I looked up with worried eyes and saw Jenny, the owner of the lounge. “I don’t drink. Can’t. Don’t have a mouth. Beginning to wish I did.”

“Something bothering you?”

“I need to find some tough photons, but I don’t know where to start looking.”

“Tough photons?”

I proceeded to tell her what had happened back at the L-HOP. “It was irresponsible of me to make such a promise. Totally irresponsible!”

“If you’re looking for some tough photons,” she said, “you might want to talk to the Quasar Gang over there. They just arrived.”

I looked into a dark corner and saw six photons sitting around a table, playing poker. Each one was a different wavelength (and therefore a different color—purple, dark blue, green, orange, red, and cyan) and held cards in their wiggles.

“They’re tough?”

“The toughest in town. Go over and introduce yourself.”

“I think I will. Thanks for the tip, Jenny.”

“Anything for you, Squiggle.”

I left my table and approached the poker players. "I'm Squiggle," I said, trying to sound a little tough myself, "and I traveled for 66 million years to get here."

The photons chuckled without taking their eyes off their cards.

I took offense at their lack of respect. "66 million years is a very long time!"

"That's cute," muttered the purple one.

"Cute? How long did *you* travel for?"

"12 billion years."

I was stunned. "12 *billion*? Where are you from?"

"A quasar at the edge of the universe."

"What's a quasar?"

The purple photon pushed some plastic poker chips into the middle of the table and stared at the green one. "I'll raise you a hundred, Green Flash," he said.

"I'll see you, Sirius," said Green Flash, adding to the pile of chips on the table.

"Three jacks!" said Sirius, revealing his cards.

"Three aces!" cried Green Flash triumphantly. He curled a wiggle around the pile of chips and pulled them in. "You lose again!"

"Are you serious?"

"No, you are. I'm Green Flash." Green Flash laughed at his own joke.

"That one's getting kinda old," said Sirius, sounding annoyed. "I can't believe I'm always losing. Now I'm broke. I guess I'll have to find a job. Always wanted to be a clerk in a grocery store."

"Excuse me," I interrupted. "Is somebody going to tell me what a quasar is?"

"Come on, kid," said Sirius with a sigh, getting out of his chair. "I'm through here. Let's talk over there."



A poker game in the Red Light Lounge.

Chapter 3

“Quasars are the most extreme objects in the universe,” Sirius told me once we had settled at another table. “Hard to believe they exist, but they do. I know because I was born in one. They're found at the center of distant galaxies where dust and gas are spiraling into a supermassive black hole. You know what a black hole is, don't you?”

“Yes,” I said. “I met one on my journey. His name was Squish.”

“Probably a small one,” said Sirius, “otherwise you wouldn't have survived. Imagine one with the mass of 10 billion suns. That's what I'm talking about. Enormous amounts of energy are released. So much energy, quasars can easily outshine a large galaxy.”

“That's amazing!”

“It is. And because they're so bright, they can be seen over huge distances. Like I told you, I came from one 12 billion light-years away.” Sirius gestured towards the poker table. “We all did. All except Little Dipper over there, the aquamarine-colored one. He came from one only 2 billion light-years away. Kind of young and inexperienced, if you ask me.”

“Young and inexperienced?” I chuckled. “If Little Dipper is young and inexperienced, what am I? I used to think being born when the dinosaurs roamed Earth meant I was old. Compared to you guys, I've barely been hatched!”



Quake the Quasar: a supermassive black hole with an accretion disc and two jets of energy shooting millions of light-years into space.

Jenny walked by. “You said you were looking for tough photons,” she said to me with a wink. “You can’t get any tougher than these.”

She was right. If a photon could travel through space for 12 billion years—almost the entire lifetime of the universe—it was capable of doing almost anything.

Sirius leaned back in his chair. “Why are you looking for tough photons?” he asked.

I told him how Skyglow and his gang of outlaws were raiding the skies above Goldendale every night. The Goldendale Observatory was getting overwhelmed by light pollution and Flapjack the Ranger was pleading for help. I had made him promises I couldn’t keep and was trying to make things right.

“And you think we’re the right photons to take on Skyglow?”

“Yes! Will you ride with me?”

“We might be tough, but none of us will ever win a popularity contest. I’m a drifter and gambler who has just lost all his money in a poker game. Frankly, I’ll join you because I’ve got nothing better to do. Spica over there—the dark blue one—has also fallen on hard times and is chopping wood to survive. He’s virtually penniless too. Green Flash next to him doesn’t care about money. He’ll be attracted by the challenge and the chance to test himself against dangerous opponents. Albireo—the orange one—is on the run and is psychologically unraveling. He suffers nightmares and has lost confidence in his own courage. If he joins us, it’ll only be because he wants to discover if he still has it in him. Beetle Juice—the red one next to him—call him ‘Beetle’—has a pathological mania for gold. He’ll only get involved if he thinks there’ll be some at the end of the rainbow. And Little Dipper is only 2 billion years old. He’ll want to come, but he’s too young so I won’t let him. Would you like me to introduce you to them?”

I was in awe at the prospect of meeting six photons that had a total of 62 billion years of traveling time under their belts. I was still trying to digest this when Sirius stood up, waved me over to the poker table, and sat me down.

“This is Squiggle,” he said, returning to his own chair. “He’s asking for our help to solve a little problem in Goldendale. Seems like there’s a photon called Skyglow over there who may have gotten too big for his britches and needs to be taught a lesson.”

“Do we get paid?” asked Spica as he shuffled the cards.

“Maybe,” I said, hoping Flapjack could come up with some cash. “Probably not much though.”

“Beats chopping wood, I suppose,” he said with a sigh.

“All you care about is money,” said Green Flash. “When was the last time we got the opportunity to show everyone how tough we are? As far as I’m concerned, the more dangerous the mission, the better! I’ve spent 12 billion years waiting for somebody worth fighting.”

Albireo threw his cards onto the table. “Speak for yourself!” he cried. “I just don’t know if I still have it in me. If only I could get a decent night’s sleep!”

Beetle was next to speak. “Any gold in it for me?”

“Definitely no gold,” I said.

“Just thought I’d ask.”

Little Dipper, the ‘youth’ photon at only 2 billion years of age, sounded the most enthusiastic. “Yeah, let’s go!” he hollered, slapping the table hard with both wiggles. “We’ll show them a thing or two!”

“You’re not going anywhere,” said Sirius. “You’re seriously underage.”

“What about Squiggle?” cried Little Dipper, pointing at me. “I’m thirty times older than he is. Nobody’s telling *him* he can’t come!”

“You’re staying here,” said Sirius. “And that’s final.”

Little Dipper slumped back into his chair, folded his wiggles, and sulked.

Sirius turned to me. “Looks like you’ve got yourself five riders,” he said. “Skyglow will never know what hit him.”

For the first time since Flapjack had left the L-HOP, I felt hopeful. Maybe—just maybe—we had a chance.

Chapter 4

For the next three days, I heard nothing from the Quasar Gang. They disappeared and I began to wonder if they were ever coming back. At high noon on the fourth day, Rachel and I decided to go look for them. We were about to go to the Red Light Lounge when five members of the gang suddenly appeared at the entrance of GSV. They were riding horses and were dressed like cowboys. A sixth horse was riderless. Little Dipper was not with the gang.

When Rachel saw them, she laughed. “What are you doing, looking like *that*?” she asked as they approached.

“Ain’t no harm looking sharp,” said Sirius with a distinct John Wayne drawl which he didn’t have before. “Gotta impress Skyglow, or he’ll reckon we ain’t worth worrying about.”

“Well, you certainly look unusual,” she confirmed. “Can’t say too many people have ever seen a photon on a horse before. I’m surprised you knew how to ride.”

“We didn’t. Been spendin’ the last couple of days learnin’. Lost count how many times I hit the dirt. Painful!”

Rachel looked for bruises. Since Sirius was already purple, she didn’t see any. “Where are your guns?”

“We don’t carry guns,” said Spica. “No point. Bullets are too slow. Photons travel at the speed of light. If we see one comin’, we just step aside.”

“How are you going to fight Skyglow then?” I asked, not sure what to make of the horses. These were the first I’d ever seen.

“Oh, we have plenty of weapons,” said Green Flash, patting a bulging saddle bag behind him.

“What kind of weapons?”

“You’ll see,” he said rather mysteriously. “Best keep your distance. Never know when one of these things might go off.”



Lined up and ready to ride!

I hastily stepped back, wondering what kind of lethal photon blasters he had brought with him from the quasar. Then I noticed that the others were carrying similar saddle bags. They were all armed! “Where’s Little Dipper?” I asked.

“Ain’t comin’,” replied Sirius. “Too young for a fight this big.”

Albireo said, “I told Little Dipper not to feel too bad about it. I wanted to bring my therapist along, and Sirius wouldn’t let me.”

“Good thing too,” said Beetle. “A therapist will only mean a smaller share of gold for me.”

“The extra horse is for you,” said Sirius, addressing me. “Mount up. Let’s ride!”

I looked uncertainly at the horse, and the horse looked uncertainly at me. After sizing him up, I put one wiggle into a stirrup, swung the other over, lifted myself up, and promptly fell off on the other side. When I hit the ground, there was a dull thud and a cloud of dust billowed into the air. The Quasar Gang guffawed at the sight of me sitting in the dirt. I attempted the ascent a few more times and failed to stay on top. The fifth attempt was successful, only I ended up facing the horse’s tail and not his head. The gang laughed even louder. Even the horse looked at me with a worried expression. When I was finally sitting the way I was supposed to be sitting, Sirius handed me a cowboy hat, and said, “Here, put this on. We’re pullin’ out. You ready?”

I was far from ready but wasn’t about to admit it.

Chapter 5

Goldendale was only 12 miles away and the ride there was mostly uneventful. I fell off my horse a couple more times but soon got the hang of things as we drew closer to the town. When we reached the first outlying houses, we noticed a cloud of dust swirling into the air about a mile behind us. Moments later, a horse with a rider appeared, galloping hard. It was Little Dipper! He was gripping his reins with one wiggle and waving his hat around wildly with the other.

“I told you to stay behind!” said Sirius angrily when Little Dipper finally caught up.

“I know you did,” said Little Dipper, catching his breath. “But I couldn’t miss this fight. I just couldn’t!”

Sirius turned back towards Goldendale and flicked his reins. "Since you've come this far," he huffed as his horse started moving forward, "you might as well join us now."

Little Dipper whooped and hollered and then fell in at the back.

Soon the seven of us rode into Goldendale. Somebody must have forgotten to tell its inhabitants we were supposed to be magnificent because nobody came out to greet us. A few turned to have a look, then went on with their business as if they saw photons riding horses every day. We followed the signs for Goldendale Observatory State Park, and were soon climbing a hill. When we reached the top, we saw the observatory with its big dome. Flapjack burst out of the front entrance and ran over to greet us.

"You came!" he cried, threatening to hug me when I dismounted. "I thought maybe you changed your mind!"

"When I make a promise," I said, "I keep it. This is the Quasar Gang. They're going to help us."

"Marvellous! Marvellous! Can I offer you some refreshments? I've got some pancakes on the griddle."

"Not for me," I said. "Hard to eat pancakes when I don't have a mouth."

Sirius wasn't interested in refreshments either, although for a different reason. He was already studying the future battlefield. "At least we're on top of a hill," he muttered, stroking his chin thoughtfully. "That's a good thing. We'll make our stand around the parking lot, then fall back to the observatory building if we have to. What time do Skyglow's raids usually begin?"

"About eight o'clock," answered Flapjack. "There are so many bad photons! I've never seen anything like it!"

Spica gave his saddlebag a friendly pat. "They won't stand a chance when they're on the receiving end of this!" he said with a smile.

"Do you have a phone?" asked Albireo nervously as he half climbed, half fell off his horse. "I need to call my therapist."

"You don't need any therapist," scoffed Green Flash. "This fight will help you find your spine again. As far as I'm concerned, the more danger there is, the better it'll make me feel."

Once he had dismounted from his horse, Beetle walked up to Flapjack. "I'll give the pancakes a pass," he said, "but if you happen to have some gold lying around . . ."



Preparing for battle inside the Goldendale Observatory.

Sirius turned to Flapjack. "Show us inside," he ordered. "Reckon I'd like to look at that telescope."

"Follow me, my friends."

He led his guests into the observatory and showed them the room under the dome. A 24-inch reflector sat on top of a tall pier and stared resolutely at a pair of shutters above it. At night, those would be opened to allow in deep-space photons like me. In the old days, trillions an hour would come flooding in. Now, Skyglow and his ilk had reduced the flow to a trickle.

"All right, listen up!" cried Sirius. "We got 4 hours before Skyglow comes ridin' in. Could be a long night, so best get some shut-eye while you can. Anybody wants to write a letter home, now's the time. Delivery will be a mite slow, but better late than never." He laughed at his own joke. Nobody else did. "I'll wake you up when it's time to gear up and take our positions."

I stretched out on the ground and tried to relax, but it was difficult. My thoughts were filled by concerns about the upcoming battle. There could be casualties—maybe even fatalities. Whatever sacrifices were made, I hoped that they would be worth it.

Chapter 6

"All right, boys! This is it! Take your positions!"

My eyes flew open and I saw Sirius stepping over me, wiggling his wiggles in agitation.

"Grab your saddlebags and get yourselves outside!" he hollered. "This ain't no practice run! I said, this ain't no practice run! They'll be here in 30 minutes!"

The photons around me jumped into action. They scurried around in circles, before finding their bearings and hurrying outside with their saddlebags. The sun was setting into the western horizon, and the lights of Goldendale below were beginning to come on. Some ravens flew past, cawing loudly before heading for distant mountains. The horses had run away.

Once the six were lined up in the parking lot, I stood in front of them. The contents of the saddlebags had hitherto been a mystery. Now I was about to find out what kind of electromagnetic bazookas they forge in quasars 12 billion light-years away.

"Time to show Squiggle our weapons!" said Sirius, opening his saddlebag and reaching inside. "Stand back! I've got a twin beater!" With pride shining in his eyes, he pulled his out and held it high above his head. It was . . . It was . . .

. . . an eggbeater?

For a few moments I stared in silence. Eventually I found the words. "What's that?" I asked, although I knew perfectly well what it was.

"It's a twin-beater photon scrambler," said Sirius, cranking the handle and giving it a few squeaky spins. "Guaranteed to mix anythin' you point it at!"

"Oh, brother," I said, rolling my eyes. I moved on to Spica. "So, what's your weapon?"

Spica reached into his own saddlebag and took out . . . a frying pan.

"You're kidding," I said, my bewilderment deepening. "You're planning to fight the most dangerous outlaw in the night sky with a *frying pan*?"

Spica patted his frying pan lovingly. "Best one I could find."

"And you, Green Flash?"

Green Flash had a toaster. "Keep them in here until they're burned to a crisp!"

Albireo unveiled a sieve. "Deep-space photons pass through. Skyglow's too fat."

Beetle whipped out a rolling pin as if he were drawing a gun from a holster. “Nothing survives Old Betsy!”

“And you, Little Dipper? Don’t tell me you brought a grapefruit spoon.”

“No,” said Little Dipper. “A photon masher!” He pulled a potato masher out of his own saddlebag and held it aloft. It immediately disassembled in midair and clattered onto the ground. He sheepishly looked down at the two parts—a handle and a wire basket—and said, “It worked okay in the store.”

After all six had revealed their ‘arsenal’, I quietly thought to myself: *These photons have crossed billions of light-years of intergalactic space. They have survived black holes, supernovae, nebulae, and a journey almost as long as the history of the universe. Yet somehow, they managed to waste the last few days shopping in Williams Sonoma.*



Shopping at the mall.

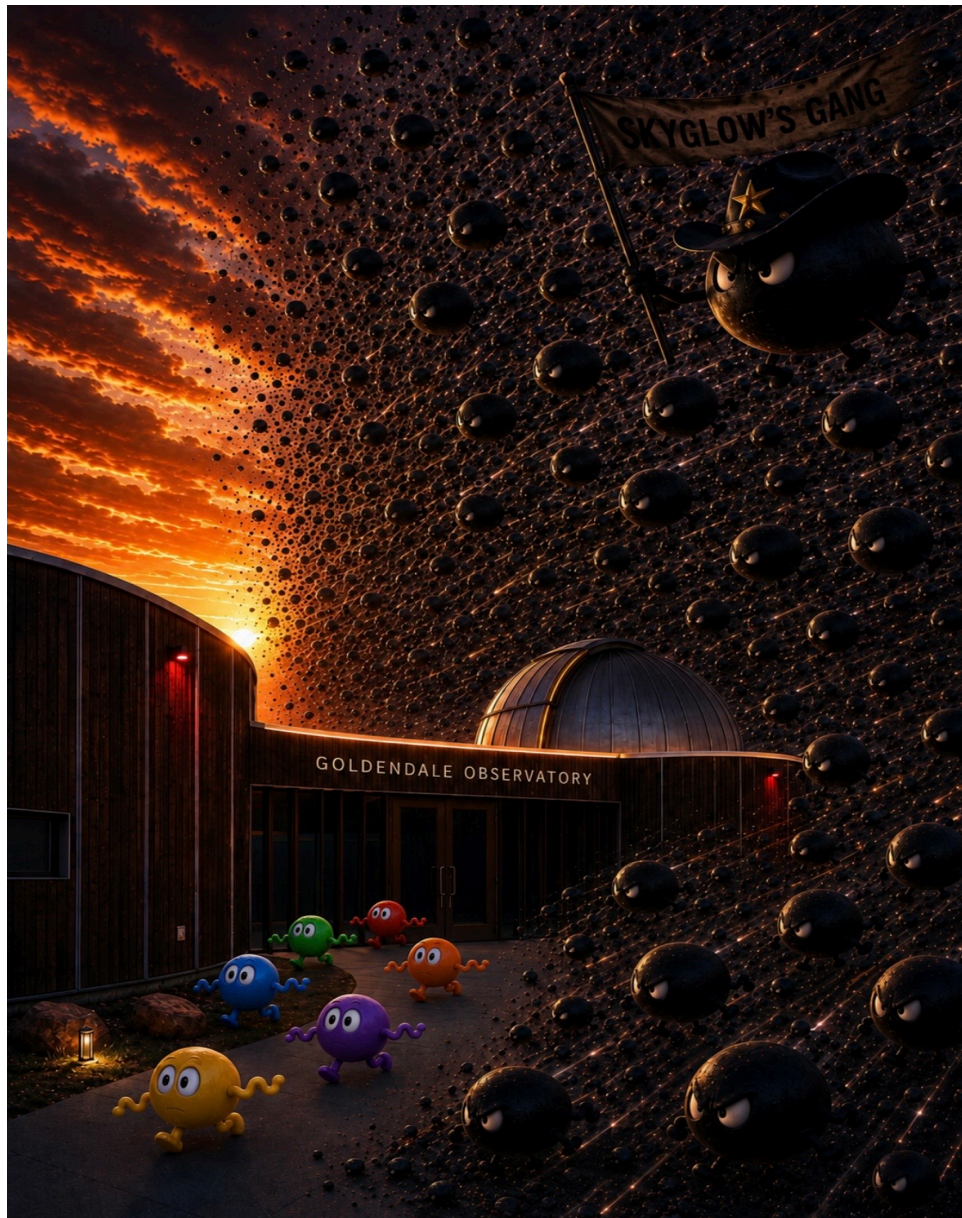
Suddenly, Flapjack burst out of the observatory and ran across the parking lot, pointing frantically at the sky. “They’re here!” he screamed. “Run for your lives!”

The Magnificent Seven forgot all about their kitchen utensils and ran for their lives.

Chapter 7

Skyglow’s attack was overwhelming from the start. He didn’t have just a handful of outlaws with him. He had trillions of them. They arose from the lights of Goldendale, gathered into a gigantic swirling cloud above the town, and assaulted the observatory with fury. The Magnificent Seven suddenly felt like the Insignificant Seven. They rapidly retreated indoors for

cover, leaving their eggbeaters, frying pans, and toasters scattered haphazardly across the ground.



The attack.

The attack lasted all night. If it hadn't been for the metal dome, I and my fellow photons would have been overwhelmed immediately. I cowered at the base of the telescope's pier, and when I wasn't thinking about my own safety, I remembered the deep-space photons that were arriving that night. They had spent millions—even billions—of years crossing the universe, dreaming of ending their journeys inside a telescope, just as I had. Instead, they would be

battered and scattered before they ever had a chance to reach the mirror. No beautiful photographs. No treasured memories. Just fear.

In the morning, when the attack finally ended, we picked ourselves off the floor and dusted ourselves off. We were relieved that we had survived the night but knew we might not be so lucky next time. There would certainly be another assault that evening, and every evening after that. We went to look for Flapjack and found him in the break room consuming pancakes for breakfast.

“Want one?” he asked, his mouth full.

He seemed to have forgotten we didn’t have mouths of our own. This time, I didn’t bother reminding him. Instead, I sat next to him at the table. “We need help,” I said plainly. “I don’t know if we can survive another attack like that. You need to go to GSV and tell Rachel we’re in trouble.”

“Pass the syrup.”

I handed it to him and watched him as he poured some onto his plate, drowning a pancake with it. “I was expecting space age weapons,” I continued, “but they turned out to be common kitchen utensils. Worthless! Only good for making an omelet.”

Flapjack paused his chewing for a moment and looked at the fridge as if making an omelet was not a bad idea.

“Rachel will know what to do,” I continued, trying to get his attention.

Eventually he looked at me instead of something edible. “I’ll go and find her after I’ve finished my breakfast,” he said. “You’re right. She’s a very clever girl. She’ll think of something.”

After Flapjack left, we spent the rest of the day alone. We went outside and gathered up what was left of our weapons. Sirius stared morosely at his bent eggbeater. Spica dropped his dented frying pan into a trash bin. Green Flash went to look for the horses and Albireo spent an hour on his cell phone, speaking earnestly with his therapist. Beetle didn’t mention gold once and Little Dipper tried unsuccessfully to reassemble his potato masher.

By sunset, Flapjack hadn’t returned. I cracked open the front door of the observatory and nervously watched the skies. When the next attack started right on schedule, I slammed the door shut, locked it, and ran to tell my fellow photons.



An eggbeater that's seen better times.

Chapter 8

The second night was worse than the first. This time, there were leaks in the dome, and some of Skyglow's photons were able to squeeze through. They screamed around the inside of the observatory like witches in a blender and sent us diving for cover. We were so terrified, our wiggles straightened to twice their normal length. By morning we were exhausted.

"What happened to Flapjack?" asked Albireo, whose therapist was no longer taking his calls. "He was supposed to be back by now."

"If he doesn't come soon," said Sirius, "I'm going to be out of energy. That hasn't happened in 12 billion years!" He seemed to have abandoned his cowboy drawl, and was speaking normally again.

"We should have paid him," said Beetle. "Gold! It's the only thing people care about these days."

When neither Flapjack nor Rachel showed up that day, I had a sinking feeling. There was no way we were going to survive another night of attacks. By 'survive', I don't mean photons can die like humans do, because we can't. We're electromagnetic wave-particle thingy-bobs, which is a fancy scientific way of saying nobody is entirely sure what we are. But if we're overwhelmed, we're as good as lost—and once a photon gets lost, nobody finds him again.

The third attack came right on schedule. A larger cloud of hostiles than ever before formed above Goldendale and headed straight to the observatory, hungry for final victory. They slammed into the dome with such force that the shutters burst open. With our only line of defense gone, we were quickly swamped by trillions of bad photons, each one pressing harder against us. If we'd had lungs, breathing would have been impossible. My vision began to fade. There was nothing I could do but pray for a miracle.

"Hold your fire!"

A deep thunderous voice rose above the fray and echoed inside my head. Every photon around me suddenly froze in place.

"Stand aside!"

The pressure on me eased, and if I'd had those lungs, they would have started breathing again. Photons all around me were cautiously backing away. I looked towards where the voice had come from. Standing in the middle of the hordes was the biggest, meanest, baddest photon I'd ever seen.

Skyglow!



Chapter 9

Skyglow glared at the deep-space photons with venom in his eyes. “I am Skyglow, Son of the McDonald’s sign of Goldendale, Commander of the Legions of Bortle 9!”

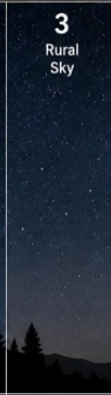
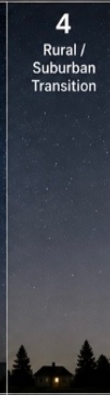
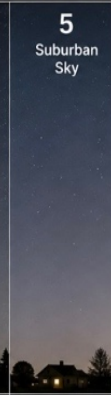
I’d never heard of Bortle 9 before, but this didn’t seem the right moment to ask what it meant.

“And these . . .”—he made a grand sweeping gesture towards the trillions of photons around him—“. . . are my faithful legionnaires!”

A tremendous cheer erupted from the observatory. “Give us the order!” they cried, edging threateningly towards the Magnificent Seven who were, at that moment, trying very hard to look as unappetizing as possible. “We are yours to command!”

Sirius held up his bent eggbeater to attract Skyglow’s attention. “Excuse me,” he said politely. “Where’s Bortle 9?”

“You fool!” Skyglow shouted. “Bortle 9 is not a place. It’s a way of measuring how badly the night sky is affected by artificial light. A Bortle 9 sky is the brightest—and the worst—you can get! Long live Bortle 9!”

The Bortle Scale A ranking of night sky brightness and star visibility								
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Excellent Dark Sky	Typical Dark Site	Rural Sky	Rural / Suburban Transition	Suburban Sky	Bright Suburban Sky	City / Suburban Transition	City Sky	Inner City Sky
								
Best for Astronomy	Milky Way visible in detail	Many stars and sky details	Fainter Milky Way, less detail	Milky Way very faint, skyglow noticeable	Only bright stars visible	Very few stars visible	Very few stars visible	No stars visible
Naked Eye Limiting Magnitude	7.6+	7.1 – 7.5	6.6 – 7.0	6.1 – 6.5	5.1 – 5.5	4.6 – 5.0	4.1 – 4.5	≤ 4.0
Lower numbers are darker skies with more stars. Higher numbers are brighter skies with less visible.								

More cheering erupted from the ranks. Skyglow waited for the noise to die down before raising his voice again. “The seven of you came from a place billions of light-years away!” he thundered. “What gives you the right to ride into our town and try to destroy us?”

“Actually,” I said, “my birth star is only 66 million light-years away. Practically next door, if you ask me—”

Spica poked me urgently with a wiggle. “Just answer the question,” he whispered, “before he blasts us into liquid plasma!”

“Well, the situation is really quite simple,” I hurriedly continued, suddenly wishing somebody else was doing the talking. “We’re deep-space photons. Some of us have travelled for billions of years to reach Earth. There are so few of us that everyone is precious. But when the sky fills with artificial light, most of us disappear into the glare. We aren’t asking people to stop using light. We’re only asking for a chance to be seen.”

“Enough!” shouted Skyglow. “We have rights too! Life at night would come to a standstill without us. How will anybody find a Big Mac with extra fries and a Coke without me to show them the way? Where will people fill up their cars? How will they watch a ballgame? You want everybody to give up the things that mean the most to them so a handful of dreamy stargazers can see photons arriving from space? I say *NO!*”

“I’m sure there’s a compromise somewhere to be found,” I said in a small voice, getting a distinct feeling I was losing the debate.

“The time for compromise is over! Now’s the time to finish you off forever!”

Skyglow and his legionnaires advanced closer. Their wiggles were coiled tightly, as if ready to spring. This was surely the end. 62 billion years of collective experience was about to be blown out like the candles on a birthday cake. At least there wouldn’t be any pain. Just nothingness for the rest of time.

“Not so fast, Skyglow!”

I looked up and saw Rachel standing in the doorway, her hands firmly planted on her hips. Flapjack was right behind her. Behind them, extending into the parking lot, were dozens of sky villagers.

Chapter 10

Skyglow turned to face Rachel and the villagers behind her. “There’s not a thing you can do to stop me,” he sneered.

“Yes, there is!” she said. “And my friends and I just finished doing it. You’ll begin to feel the effects any moment now.”

For the first time, a trace of uncertainty flickered across Skyglow’s face. “What have you done?” he demanded to know.

“We’ve been knocking on doors all over Goldendale, talking to its inhabitants about light pollution and asking them to shield their outdoor lights at night. Most were happy to cooperate. Even McDonald’s found a way to direct its lights down instead of letting them shine aimlessly up into the sky.”

“Not McDonald’s!”

“Yes. McDonald’s. And the Chevron station next to it.”

“You got Chevron too?”

“Feeling weaker yet?”

Skyglow ran his wiggles over his skin as if performing a medical exam. “I do! Strange! You may have the support of those people in town right now, but they won’t be happy when they’re stumbling around in the dark, trying to find their way around!”

“We’re not turning the lights off,” said Flapjack. “We’re simply making them shine where people need them. The sidewalks stay bright. The roads stay safe. But far fewer of your kind escape into the sky.”



Downward shining lights.

Skyglow swung around to check on the trillions of photons he had brought with him. There weren’t as many of them as before—perhaps only a few billion. A few gaps in the ranks had appeared and were widening by the second. He was beginning to look alarmed.

Rachel spotted me clinging to the telescope pier and rushed over. “Squiggle! Are you okay?”

I gave her a squeeze. “I knew you would come to rescue us,” I said. “I just knew it!”

The other deep-space photons were also relieved to see her, although they weren’t quite as ready to admit it.

“Thank you for coming,” said Sirius, nonchalantly hiding his eggbeater behind his back. “Although I think we weren’t doing too badly.”

“I wish I hadn’t thrown away my frying pan,” said Spica to Flapjack. “You could have used it to make pancakes.”

Green Flash was looking triumphant. Albireo was telling everybody he didn’t need a therapist any longer. Beetle said that if he wasn’t getting any gold in Goldendale, he was going somewhere else to find some. Little Dipper was already making sure that the villagers knew he was one of the Magnificent Seven.

Skyglow’s legionnaires dwindled from billions to millions, and then from millions to thousands. Before long, he was the only one left, looking pale and utterly defeated. Then, as we all watched, there was a small puff of smoke, and he was gone too.



Skyglow disappears in a puff of smoke.

“Let’s go back to GSV,” said Rachel, taking one of my wiggles in her hand and giving it a gentle squeeze. “We’re due for a rest, don’t you think?”

Once we returned to the village, the Quasar Gang went straight to Red Light Lounge and started another poker game. Rachel led me out to the middle of the Portal where the sky was darkest and the stars were brightest and pointed to the southwest.

“Look over there, Squiggle,” she said. “What do you see?”

I followed her finger, then broke into a big smile. It wasn’t what I saw that made me happy. It was what I *didn’t* see.

The light dome over Goldendale was gone.

