

SQUIGGLE

and the

GRAVITY GAMES

BOOK 5

SQUASH

SQUISH

EVENT HORIZON
STADIUM
★ ★ HOME OF THE ★ ★
GRAVITY GAMES

GRAVITATIONAL-
WAVE SURFING

COSMIC
TUG-OF-WAR

ASTEROID
SHOT PUT

LIGHT
BENDING

HOT DOG
EATING

PLANETARY
SLINGSHOT

GRAVITATIONAL-
WAVE GENERATION

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.

I was sitting with Rachel on the deck of the L-HOP, enjoying the good weather, when a raven landed on the branch of a ponderosa pine tree in front of us and expelled the contents of its cloaca. The droppings fell to the ground with a wholesome *splat* and glistened in the bright sunlight.

“Reminds me of Sir Isaac Newton,” said Rachel pensively.

“How can bird poop remind you of . . . of . . .”

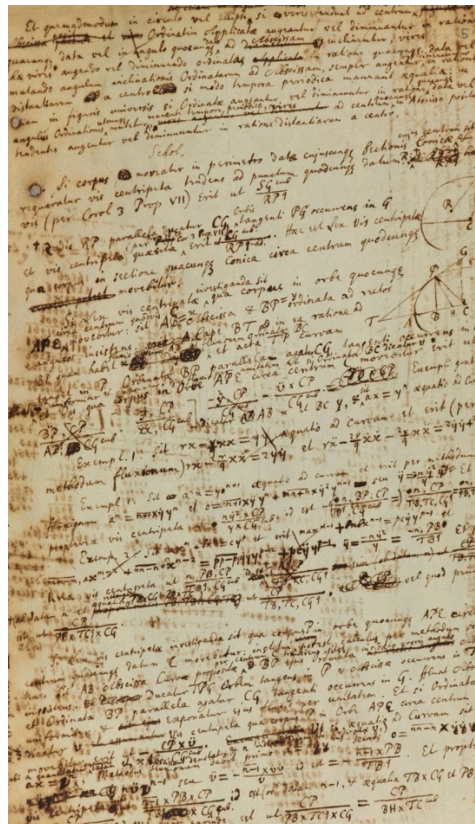
“ . . . Sir Isaac? He was an English mathematician and physicist—one of the most important scientists who ever lived. He was sitting in his garden—kind of how we’re sitting right now—when he saw an apple drop from a tree. It started him thinking about gravity.”

“Oh, I get it. Apples and bird droppings—they both obey the laws of gravity.”



The force of gravity.

“We’ve been studying gravity in school recently,” continued Rachel. “When he saw the apple fall, Newton wondered whether the same force pulling the apple towards Earth might extend all the way to the Moon. If so, perhaps the Moon was continually falling towards Earth while its sideways motion kept it in orbit. The same principle could then explain the planets orbiting the sun. He eventually developed this into his Law of Universal Gravitation: the force



A page from Sir Isaac Newton's work.

that makes an apple fall is fundamentally the same force that governs the motion of the Moon and planets. Gravity is a force between masses.” Rachel’s cell phone went off. Spooked, the raven flapped away. “Hello? Squirm? Great to hear from you again! Squiggle is with me. I’ll put you on speaker phone.”

Rachel punched a button and suddenly I heard Squirm speaking.

“... has been calling and calling, insisting I find Squiggle as quickly as possible. He sounded desperate.”

“Who has been calling and calling?” I asked.

“Squish the Black Hole,” said Squirm. “He’s one of the biggest black holes in the universe. At least a million sun masses. He says he knows you.”

I had no difficulty remembering Squish. I was leaving my home galaxy, heading towards intergalactic space. He had just swallowed the planet Gooseberry 5—which he said tasted like gooseberries—and credited me for bringing him luck. As I zoomed past him, he’d had time to tell me that his purpose in life was to win the Gravity Games. He hadn’t seemed such a big black hole at the time, but that could have changed if he had been busy eating planets ever since then.

“What’s he want?” I asked.

“He needs your help.”

“A black hole the mass of a million suns needs the help of a photon?”

“That’s what he said. I’ve already had my worms dig a wormhole from GSV to his location. A direct transport. No changes. You could be there in minutes.”

“Okay, I’ll go,” I said, without thinking too hard about it and getting up from my chair. “Rachel, you’d better stay here. It’s the wrong environment for a human. I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

“Take care of yourself, Squiggle,” said Rachel.

“I will. Squirm, are you still there?”

“Yes, I am.”

“Where’s the entrance to the—”

Suddenly, I found it. Or rather, it found me. One second, I was standing next to Rachel. The next, she disappeared from view and I was on my way to see Squish for the first time in 66 million years.

Chapter 2

When I emerged from the end of the wormhole, it was clear I had left the Milky Way and was back in NGC 3972. The constellations around me were once again just as I remembered them as a youth. What impressed me the most, however, was how quickly I had just crossed 66 million light-years of space. Instead of breaking the speed-of-light speed limit, Squirm’s wormholes took shortcuts, allowing travelers to go enormous distances in minutes.

Squish was not hard to find. He was right in front of me, looking vastly larger than I remembered. His accretion disc—huge regions of gas and dust that glowed brightly as they spiraled around him—was very active and could only mean one thing: he was busy chewing on a planet or a star, getting ready to swallow. When he was ready, he gulped, and whatever it was disappeared into his event horizon—the boundary around a black hole where not even light can escape.

“Squiggle!” he said in his deep voice. “Wonderful to see you again after so long!”

“Nice to see you too! You’ve grown!”

“Millions of years of hard training.”

“You still want to win the Gravity Games?”

“I want nothing else! Since I saw you, I qualified three times but never got beyond the first round. But this time, things are different. I’ve made it to the final!”

“Congratulations! So, what’s the problem?”

“I’m facing off with Squash.”

“Who’s Squash?”

“Squash is the reigning champion. He has won four of the last five Games. You’ve never seen a bigger, blacker hole!”

“I wouldn’t know about that . . .” I said. “*You’re* pretty big.”

“He’s *much* bigger than I am. Once I saw him consume a small galaxy. Went down like a strawberry shake. As soon as he finished burping, he helped himself to seconds.”

“Wow! So, what do you need me for? I’m only a puny photon.”

“Puny? Pah!” cried Squish, spitting asteroids as he spoke. “You bring me good luck! If you hadn’t shown up when you did, Gooseberry 5 would have gotten stuck in the old gizzard and I wouldn’t have qualified. I need you to come with me to the Games, and to cheer for me when I compete against Squash. It’s the only way I’ll win!”



Meeting Squish again after 66 million years.

I knew that I wasn't anybody's good luck amulet, but this wasn't the time to argue. So, I asked logistical questions instead—the who, what, when, where, and how questions that were pouring through my mind in rapid succession. The Gravity Games, as it turned out, were the single most important sporting event for all black holes anywhere. They were held once every million years at Event Horizon Stadium. The winner was awarded the Singularity Trophy, named after the mysterious region predicted to exist at the center of every black hole.

“How do you fit so many black holes into a stadium?” I asked, scratching my head. “Won't they just swallow each other up?”

“Of course not.”

“Why not?”

“There are basic rules against it.”

“Okay, then how do black holes get there? They can't simply decide to travel somewhere.”

“We use wormholes. How else?”

“You can fit through a wormhole?”

“Not through one of the regular ones. The Gravity Games organizers connect every competitor, official, and spectator to the stadium with competition-class wormholes. They're so big, Squirm's worms have to use heavy construction equipment to dig through the space-time fabric. So, what do you say, Squiggle? Will you come with me? Will you work your magic one more time?”

I wanted to know what would happen to me if Squish lost. I could imagine his enraged supporters cornering me somewhere and plucking out my wiggles. But the excitement of attending the Gravity Games was more powerful than my fear of being dewiggled and so I agreed to accompany him with an enthusiastic nod. “When do we leave?”

“Now!”

At that moment, a gigantic wormhole yawned open between Squish and me. Around the entrance I saw an army of bulldozers and excavators, operated by worms in hard hats. Beyond them, a string of orange lights spiraled into the distance, presumably leading to Event Horizon Stadium, wherever in the universe that was.

“Come on!” said Squish, parts of him already passing into the wormhole like an amoeba on the move. “I’m ready to win a championship!”

Without much thought for the potential risks, I followed him into the orange light.

Chapter 3

On the final night of the Gravity Games, Event Horizon Stadium was filling up with black holes from every corner of the universe. Outside, worker worms operating heavy construction equipment were opening and closing hundreds of competition-class wormholes, unloading even more black holes into the crowds. They streamed through the gates, went through security, and then climbed the ramps to find their seats. They bought hot dogs from food stands, drank beer, and helped themselves to programs. The atmosphere was electric. This was a once-in-a-million-year event, and everybody was there to watch history take place.

When Squish and I arrived at the end of our own wormhole, we were met by a black hole official who must have been expecting us.

“Welcome to Event Horizon Stadium,” he said, handing us two programs. “I’m Squeeze, your host while you’re here. Honored to meet you, Squish. Please wait here until it’s time to start. Once you’ve been announced and are on your way, I’ll show Squiggle to his seat.”

“I’ll be by myself?” I asked anxiously.

“No, I’ll sit next to you,” said Squeeze, “so I can answer your questions.”

At the appointed hour, the crowd became much quieter in hushed anticipation. Then it heard the voice of an announcer blasting through massive speakers.

“LADIES AND GENTLEMEN! BLACK HOLES OF ALL MASSES! ARE YOU READY FOR GRAVITY?”

The crowd responded with a resounding “Yes!”

“In the orange wormhole . . .” the announcer continued, “hailing from the galaxy NGC 3972 . . . (loud cheers) . . . weighing in at a million solar masses . . . (louder cheers) . . . undefeated in gravitational competition for the past million years . . . (loudest cheers) . . . Devourer of stars! Bender of space! Master of the event horizon! Put your accretion disks together for the one—the only—the magnificent...the massive...the SUUUUPERMASSIVE . . . SQUUUUUUUISH!”

Powerful spotlights swung around and flooded Squish with light. Half of the black holes in the stadium went berserk, jumping up and down and yelling their approval.

“And in the yellow wormhole . . .” continued the announcer, “. . . hailing from a galaxy so distant nobody can remember its name . . . (loud cheers) . . . weighing in at an absolutely ridiculous number of solar masses . . . (louder cheers) . . . the only black hole ever to swallow a small galaxy . . . (loudest cheers) . . . Crusher of planets! Shredder of stars! Colossus of the

cosmos! Our defending champion. Put your accretion disks together for the giant ...the gargantuan...the gravitationally GIGANTIC . . . SQUUUUUUUUAAAAASH!”

The spotlights swung over to Squash, and, this time, the other half of the black holes in the stadium went berserk.

Squash was truly mega-normous, noticeably larger than Squish, with a broad, blazing accretion disk swirling violently around him. While Squish was approachable despite his size, Squash looked intimidating from the moment he emerged from his wormhole. He moved into the stadium with the confidence of a reigning champion and recognized his fans with a simple nod.

While Squish and Squash made final preparations for their contest, Squeeze took me to my seat and sat down next to me. “There are seven events in the final,” he said. “The first is Gravity Pull. Squish and Squash will be placed on opposite sides of a planet and try to pull it toward themselves using gravity alone.”

“Like tug-of-war?”

“Exactly. Except there’s no rope. Then, Gravity Wave Surfing. They’ll ride gravitational waves and see who can make the most points for style and degree of difficulty.”

“Black holes know how to surf?”

“Tonight they do. Next, Space-Time Bending, Hot Dog Eating, Planetary Slingshot, Asteroid Shot Put, and last—the biggest and most important—Gravity Wave Generation. Can I get you a hot dog?”

“No, thanks,” I said. “Photons don’t eat hot dogs. No mouth. But I do have some questions about gravity. This morning, a friend told me she’s studying gravity in school and learned that it’s a force between masses. But you’re talking about bending space-time and gravitational waves. What’s going on?”

“Gravity isn’t a force between masses at all. It’s a result of masses distorting space and time around them.”

“Space and time?”

“The three dimensions of space we’re all familiar with, and then the fourth dimension—time. Together they’re called space-time. You’re traveling through it right now, even if you’re standing still. That’s because time is always moving forward. Think of space-time as the stage on which everything in the universe happens. Stars, planets, black holes—even photons like you. So if you’re traveling through empty space, you’re following a neutral path through undistorted space-time and so you feel weightless. But if you found a planet and stood on it, you would no longer feel weightless; the ground would push against your feet. That’s because the planet’s mass is distorting the local space-time and the ground is preventing you from following the neutral path you were on before. That’s what gravity is.”

“So Earth orbits the Sun because the Sun bends space-time?”

“Exactly.” Squeeze pointed toward Squish and Squash. “Gravity around a black hole is so extreme, space-time becomes enormously distorted. Get too close and every possible path leads inward.”

A tremendous cheer erupted from somewhere across the stadium.

“And what about gravitational waves?” I asked above the noise. “How do those fit in?”

“If a massive object moves in the right way—especially if enormous masses accelerate around each other—it disturbs space-time. Those disturbances can travel outward as waves.”

“Waves of gravity?”

“Waves in space-time itself. Gravitational waves. They travel across the universe at the speed of light.”

“So Squish and Squash can make them?”

“Can they ever! And that’s why Gravity Wave Generation is the final event. Each competitor will have to produce the strongest gravitational waves he can.”

Once again, the loudspeakers erupted into life. “BLACK HOLES!” cried the announcer. “LET THE GAMES BEGIN!”

Squeeze leaned forward in his seat. “Enough physics for now. Let’s enjoy the Games.”

Chapter 4

Squish and Squash faced each other at either end of the arena, doing their very best to look like winners. Clearly, Squash was the more massive of the two, but ultimate victory depended more on skills than brute strength. A rocky planet was rolled out and positioned between the two. When the game official was satisfied everything was ready, he held a red flag high, paused, and then brought it down suddenly to the ground.

A jolt shook the planet and it rose up high. Mountain ranges fell off and swirled around in circles before disappearing into Squish and Squash. The announcer delivered commentary filled with excitement and drama. His voice became higher pitched when the planet started to shift slowly towards Squash.

“And they’re pulling!” he shouted into his microphone. “Squash has the early advantage—the planet is moving! Slowly, slowly, but it’s definitely moving towards Squash! Squish is holding on—wait! It’s stopped! The planet has stopped! And now it’s going the other way! Squish is pulling it back! What a recovery! We’ve got ourselves a contest! But look at Squash! He’s changing tactics! The planet has stopped again—and there it goes! Back towards Squash! Faster now! Squish is fighting back, but he’s losing ground! Squash has it! Squash has it! The planet is accelerating! Squish can’t stop him! It’s getting closer to the event horizon—closer—CLOSER—AND IT’S GONE!”

The whole planet disappeared into Squash and the stadium erupted.

“SQUASH WINS THE GRAVITY PULL!”

A 4-sided electronic scoreboard hung high over the arena, said to be the largest and most expensive one ever built. Its massive jumbotron screens flashed images of fireworks exploding, and then displayed the current score: Squash 1, Squish 0.

Compared to a small galaxy, a planet was not much to swallow. Nevertheless, Squash celebrated his victory by delivering a mega-belch of such magnitude and resonance that I was knocked off my seat—along with most of the black holes around me. Worker worms watching from the wormhole entrances above the stadium lost their footing and tumbled wriggling into the stands. Everybody stopped cheering and groaned with feigned disgust at the vulgarity of the performance. Then they laughed themselves silly and begged for an encore.



The Gravity Pull competition.

When I returned to my senses, I picked myself off the floor and staggered back to my seat.

“Are you okay?” asked Squeeze when he saw me.

“Barely.”

“Sorry about that. He usually gives us a warning.”

“Ladies and gentlemen,” cried the announcer. “The time has arrived for the second event of the competition: Gravity Wave Surfing! Two volunteer black holes will butt heads at one end of the stadium and generate gravitational waves. Squish and Squash will ride each wave and will be scored by a panel of judges. Points will be awarded for technical skills and artistic impression. Since Squish lost the last event, he’ll have the first ride. Can I have two volunteers, please?”

Two black holes stepped forward and positioned themselves at one end of the arena. Squish and Squash stood near them with surfboards in hand. A panel of ten distinguished-looking judges sat at the opposite end, quietly watching the preparations and waiting for the competition to begin.

When everybody was ready, the announcer asked the two volunteers to create the first wave of the event. They rushed towards each other and collided with a sickening thud. This generated a gravitational wave that headed off towards the other end of the stadium—a ripple through space-time that bent everything in its way into weird shapes as it passed.

With perfect timing, Squish threw his surfboard onto it and jumped on board. He crouched low and accelerated along the ripple, then leaned hard into a sweeping bottom turn. He shot upward, carved across the crest, snapped the board around and came racing back the other way.

“Beautiful cutback!” shouted the announcer. “Excellent control!”

Squish climbed the wave again, launched himself completely clear of it, spun through a full 360, and landed squarely back on his board.

The crowd roared.

“An aerial 360! Magnificent!”



Gravity surfing.

Squish wasn't finished. He raced toward the front of his board and attempted something that looked suspiciously like a hang ten, despite not having any toes. Then, as the gravitational wave began to fade, he threw himself into one final spectacular cutback and rode the last ripple all the way to the end of the arena.

The judges scribbled furiously on their scorecards and then held them up for all to see. 9.5, 9.0, 9.5, 9.5, 9.5, 8.5, 9.0, 9.5, 9.5, 9.5!

When it was Squash's turn, things didn't go quite as smoothly. He caught the gravitational wave perfectly and started his ride with a series of impressive turns. Then he attempted an aerial 360, but only made it through 270 and landed sideways. His surfboard shot out from underneath him and disappeared into the stands, while Squash himself went careening across the arena directly towards the panel of judges.

The judges saw him coming. For several seconds, nobody moved. Then all ten scrambled to get out of the way. Unfortunately, they weren't quite fast enough.

WHAM!

Squash plowed into them like an oversized bowling ball. The judges went flying head-over-heels in ten different directions. Scorecards, pencils, and spectacles were scattered everywhere. The crowd gasped in horror, then leaned forward in their seats to get a better look.

When the dust finally settled, a shaking hand slowly emerged from the wreckage, holding up a scorecard. The number written on it was clear for everybody to see . . .
... 3.5.

Chapter 5

The next event, Space-Time Bending, was delayed while the judges were checked by medics. Fortunately, nobody was seriously injured and so the Games were allowed to resume. Space dust poured out of machines on the sidelines and gradually filled the stadium with haze. Then a powerful laser at one end of the arena switched on, sending its beam toward a heavy steel target at the opposite end. The dust enabled the crowd to clearly see the laser beam, and they oohed and aahed when they saw how straight it was.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” cried the announcer. “Our next event is Space-Time Bending! A laser beam will be fired straight down the length of the arena toward the steel target at the opposite end. Squash and Squish will take turns using their gravity to bend the beam and try to hit the bullseye. The closer they get to the center, the higher the score! Now, I must ask everyone to remain absolutely silent during each attempt. Bending space-time requires deep concentration, and we don’t want anything disturbing our competitors’ trains of thought. So please—no talking, no cheering, no unnecessary noises of any kind! And don’t forget to turn off your cell phones too.”

Squeeze reached for his phone and turned it off. “Do you have one?” he asked me.
I shook my head.

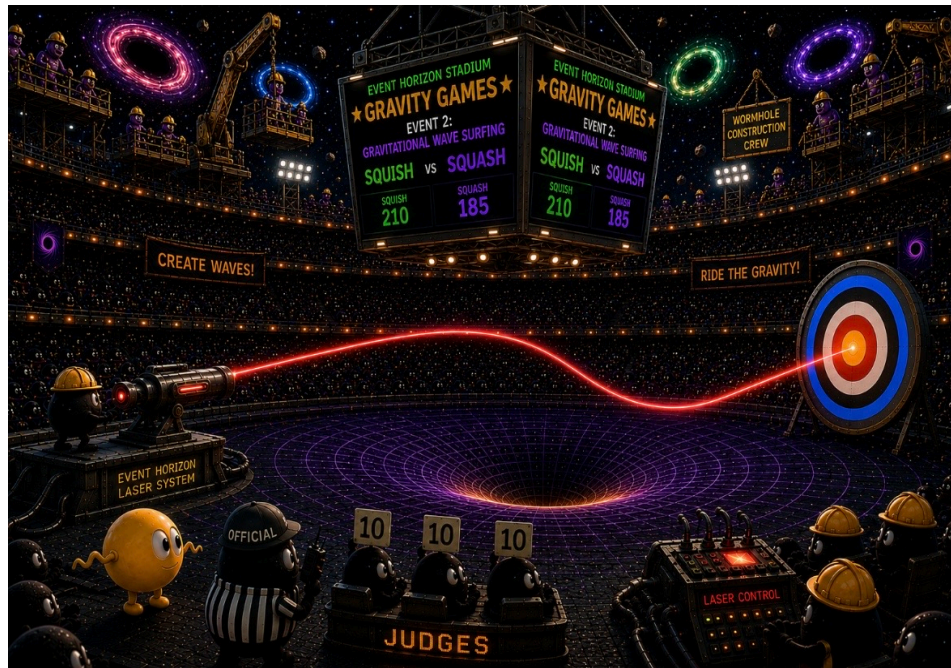
“Good. At the last Games a million years ago, somebody’s phone went off during this event. Squash was distracted and was given an extra turn. It was unprecedented!”

Squash was up first. He took his position at the center of the arena, and the crowd obediently fell silent. Even the worker worms outside the stadium cut the engines of their bulldozers and excavators and waited quietly. When Squash was ready, the laser was turned on and its beam cut through the dust. Squash approached it, and then, with a look of intense concentration on his face, he started bending the light towards him. But bending the light was only half the challenge. He had to aim it too. The laser beam struck the bullseye dead center. When it was switched off, everybody could see it had left a smoking crater in the steel.

The crowd broke the silence and roared its approval.

“A perfect score!” cried the announcer. “Squash has hit the bullseye dead center! It doesn’t get any better than that!”

Squash acknowledged the crowd with the barest trace of a smile.



The Space-Time Bending competition.

“And now it’s Squish’s turn. Remember, ladies and gentlemen—absolute silence, please. Not a sound!”

The cheering quickly died away. Within seconds, Event Horizon Stadium was once again completely silent. The laser was switched on, and its beam cut across the arena. Squish approached it and took his position. For several seconds, he did nothing but stare at the target. Then he took another step closer.

At first, nothing happened. The beam remained perfectly straight. Then, after the longest time, it slowly began to curve towards him. Beads of sweat appeared on his forehead as his concentration deepened. The curve became more pronounced, and the far end of the beam crept across the steel target towards the bullseye. Nobody in the stadium moved. Nobody coughed. Nobody even whispered. Even the worker worms remained perfectly still beside their silent machines. The beam inched closer to the bullseye. Squish narrowed his eyes and concentrated even harder. A little more . . . Just a tiny bit more . . .

Suddenly, from somewhere high in the stands, a cell phone rang.

Squish’s concentration snapped. The laser beam jerked away from the target and pointed straight up, striking the huge scoreboard above. All four Jumbotron screens exploded and sparks flew everywhere. Then the whole structure shuddered, tore loose from its supports with an ear-splitting screech of metal, and crashed into the arena below.

Once again, the Gravity Games were delayed. The wreckage on the arena was several stories high, and if this had been any other kind of competition, the cleanup would have taken months. Black holes, however, are well known throughout the universe for being efficient scavengers. One of the officials approached the wreckage, his accretion disc glowed brightly, and, within minutes, everything was gone.



Oops.

The announcer's voice came over the loudspeakers. "Well, ladies and gentlemen, since we no longer have a scoreboard, I suppose I'll have to keep score myself. Squash wins the Space-Time Bending event, giving him two victories to Squish's one. The score is now Squash two, Squish one!"

The crowd cheered again.

"And now, on to our next event! This one requires no concentration whatsoever. In fact, it barely requires any skill. Just an enormous appetite! Ladies and gentlemen, I present to you the Gravity Games' Hot Dog Eating Contest!"

I heard a voice behind me.

"Are you Squiggle the Photon?"

I turned around and saw a black hole looking at me intently. "Yes, I'm Squiggle."

"Will you come with me, please?"

"Is there a problem?"

"No, no problem at all. There's a girl from Earth who wants to see you."

"A girl? Rachel?"

"Please come with me, and I'll take you to her."

I wondered what Rachel could be doing here. Whatever she wanted, it must be important. “Of course,” I said. “I’ll come right away.” I told Squeeze I wouldn’t be long, and then accompanied the black hole up some steps and out of the stadium.

I soon discovered that this black hole had no intention of taking me to see Rachel. She was most likely still on Earth where I had left her, many light-years away. Instead, he took me to the entrance of a nearby wormhole, grabbed my wiggles, and threw me inside.

“What . . . What’s going on?” I cried.

“Squash doesn’t like it when his opponents bring their lucky charms with them,” he said.

“I’m not a lucky charm!” I said. “Squish thinks I am, but I’m not!”

“Lucky or not, you’re going for a little trip.”

“Where are you sending me?”

“To the Sandor Desert on Planet Scorchia. It has six suns. No shade. No food. No water. You won’t last more than a few hours.”

I could have explained to him that photons don’t need food and water—or even shade—but, at this point, it seemed an academic exercise. Instead, I looked at the wormhole around me, and felt oddly reassured that everything was going to be alright. If it had been built by Squirm, the Sandor Desert on Planet Scorchia was most likely the last place in the universe I was going.

“Bye-bye, Squiggle,” said the black hole, giving me a little wave. A second later, the entrance closed, and I was alone inside.

Chapter 6

Only five minutes after the tunnel entrance at Event Horizon Stadium closed, the one at the other end opened. I was greeted not by a blast of hot air from the Sandor desert of Scorchia, but by a cool tropical breeze from what could have been the Caribbean. I found myself standing on a beautiful sandy beach lined with palm trees gently swaying in the wind. A large, purple worm was sitting on a beach towel, rubbing sunscreen onto himself with four hands.

“Ah!” he cried, throwing away the bottle. “You’re finally here!”

“Squirm!” I said, greeting my friend from Clapham Junction. “What are you doing here?”



Meeting Squirm on some tropical island.

Squirm explained. “I received an urgent order for a wormhole to link the Gravity Games with the Sandor Desert of Scorchia. Nobody ever wants to go to Scorchia, so naturally I investigated. Turned out it was meant for a single photon with two wiggles. That had to be you. I figured you must be in trouble so I went ahead and scheduled it, but instead of sending you to Scorchia, I brought you here—to the tropical island of Perfection on the planet Paradiso. Beautiful place, isn’t it?”

“I can’t stay,” I said, genuinely disappointed. “Got to get back to the Games as quickly as possible. Squish needs me for good luck.”

“Wormholes require two hours to reset after every trip,” said Squirm. “Union rules. You might as well relax and catch some rays with me.”

“Two hours? But the Games may be over by then! Squish could lose!”

“Rules are rules, I’m afraid.”

Squirm and I talked on the beach as we waited for the wormhole to reset. When it was operational again, I bid my friend farewell and returned to the Event Horizon Stadium. When I emerged from the wormhole, I was shocked to see that the stadium was now in complete ruins—just a huge pile of rubble. Squash was sitting amongst the wreckage, consuming large portions of it at a time. Black hole spectators were streaming away by the thousands, heading towards competition-class wormholes that would take them home. Half of them were jubilant—singing songs and waving flags. The other half were very glum indeed.

Squeeze spotted me and came running up. “There you are!” he cried with relief. “You never came back like you promised! Where were you?”

“It’s a long story,” I said. Looking around, I asked, “What happened to the stadium?”

“I was hoping you wouldn’t notice,” said Squeeze, shaking his head with dismay. “After you left, things went from bad to worse. Squish won the hot dog contest but ate so many he had a terrible reaction to the tons of sodium nitrite he consumed. Started convulsing and brought down half the stadium before anyone could control him. Squash won the asteroid shot put. One of his throws missed the arena completely and went straight through the upper stands. Destroyed most of what was left. Anything left upright was leveled when Squish won the planetary slingshot. That was the sixth event, and the score after that was tied at 3 - 3.”

“So what happened with Making Waves? Who won the—”

I caught sight of Squish making his way over to us. He was surrounded by fans jumping up and down, cheering for him and giving him high fives. The answer to my next question was suddenly obvious.

“I won!” he bellowed when he reached us. “I won! I won! I won! I get to take the trophy home. Squash gets to eat the stadium. Thanks, Squiggle. I couldn’t have done it without your good luck!”

“But Squish—” I began.

“Don’t give me any nonsense about not being my good luck photon!” interrupted Squish. “You are, and that’s final!”

It may have be the final word for him, but not for me. “Squash found out what I was doing here and ordered his agent to get rid of me,” I persisted. “I was removed from the stadium after the light bending event and was sent to a tropical island on the other side of the universe. I wasn’t present for most of the Games. You won the championship on your own merits. You didn’t need me at all!”

Squish stared at me in astonishment. “You mean . . . you weren’t even here?”

“Not for most of it.”

For several seconds, Squish said nothing. Then, very slowly, a broad smile spread across his face as he understood the implications of what Squiggle was telling him. “I’m going home to celebrate with my fans!” he said, triumphantly holding up his trophy for all to see. “Maybe we’ll



The Gravity Games Champion—Squish!

even have a parade! And after that, when all the celebrating is over, I start training again. No time to waste. There'll be another Gravity Games in a million years, and I'll need to defend my title!"

Squish turned, and gripping his trophy tightly, he headed for the nearest wormhole. I watched him pass through the entrance, and then disappear as he was carried away. He was right about one thing all along—he had been born to win the Gravity Games.

He just didn't need a lucky photon to help him do it.

