

★ BOOK 6 ★

SQUIGGLE

— AND THE —

GREAT LUNAR GOLD RUSH

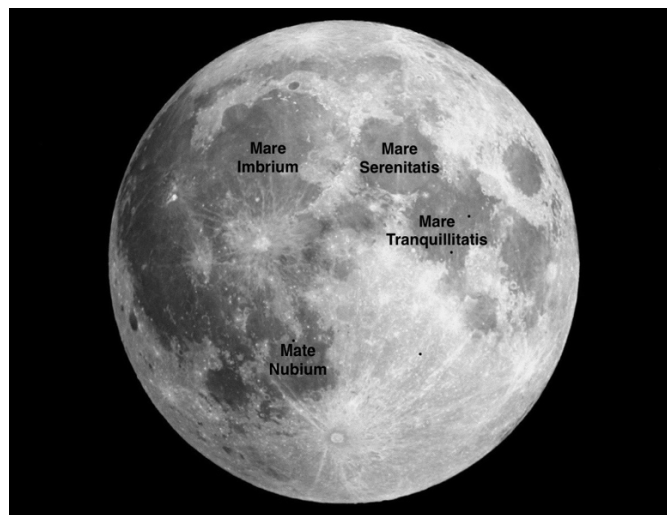


★ CHRISTOPHER SMYTHIES ★

Chapter 1

I am Squiggle the Photon, born from hydrogen fusion 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.

The Moon was formed about 4.5 billion years ago, probably after a Mars-size world struck the young Earth. Debris blasted into orbit eventually clumped together to form a sphere. At first it was extremely hot and partly molten, but over time its surface cooled and hardened. For hundreds of millions of years, it was battered by asteroids and comets. Some of the largest impacts created enormous basins. Later, molten rock from inside the Moon flowed into these basins and cooled, producing smooth plains. Early astronomers actually thought these dark areas might be bodies of water and gave them *mare* ('sea') names associated with weather and atmospheric phenomena. Examples include *Mare Imbrium* (Sea of Rains), *Mare Nubium* (Sea of Clouds), *Mare Tranquillitatis* (Sea of Tranquility, and where humans first stepped onto the Moon), and *Mare Serenitatis* (Sea of Serenity). Three of these four names could not have been more off base, since neither rain nor clouds can ever be found on the Moon, and *Mare Serenitatis* was the site of the gold rush which was anything but serene, at least during the short period of time I was there.



The Moon

The Space Age transformed lunar exploration. On July 20, 1969, Apollo 11 astronauts Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin became the first humans to walk on the Moon. Five more Apollo missions landed astronauts there through 1972. Altogether, 12 people have walked on the Moon, bringing hundreds of kilograms of lunar rocks back to Earth.

Today the Moon has again become a major destination for human exploration. At the end of one recent expedition, the space capsule splashed down in the Pacific Ocean. The hatch opened and an astronaut climbed out, raising a large yellow rock high into the air for all to see.

“Gold!” he yelled to the helicopters hovering overhead. “There’s gold on the Moon!”

After that, the relationship between humans and the Moon would never be the same.

Chapter 2

News of the discovery of gold on the Moon swept around the world. Within minutes, it was the top story on every television network and news website on Earth. Newspapers rushed out special editions. Social media exploded. Economists argued about what it would do to the price of gold. Scientists argued about how the gold got there. Politicians argued about who owned it.

Everybody else wondered how they could get their hands on some.

The gold rush began almost immediately. Any government that had a rocket capable of reaching the Moon pulled it out of storage, dusted it off, filled it with fuel, and launched it. Rockets originally intended to carry satellites, scientific instruments, and astronauts were hurriedly converted into lunar prospecting vehicles. Launch pads around the world thundered day and night. Private companies joined the frenzy. SpaceX, Blue Origin, Virgin Galactic, and dozens of smaller companies took whatever spacecraft and rockets they had and modified them for trips to the Moon. New rockets were designed, built, tested, and launched at astonishing speed. Some worked. Others blew up spectacularly before getting anywhere near space.

Then ordinary people decided they weren’t going to wait while governments and billionaires got all the gold.

Homemade rockets began appearing in backyards, garages, parking lots, and farmers’ fields. People strapped fireworks to their backs and lit them. Others tied hundreds of balloons to lawn chairs. One man attempted to reach the Moon inside a converted cement mixer. Visits to emergency rooms for burns and broken bones quadrupled overnight.

When gold fever infected Goldendale Sky Village, the villagers held an emergency meeting at the Red Light Lounge. I was invited and sat quietly in a corner.

“If everybody else is going to the Moon, why don’t we?” asked one.

There were murmurs of agreement.

“We definitely have the expertise,” said another. “Some of us already know how to build rockets. Others have lots of computer and technical experience.”

Several heads nodded.

“We can land on the Moon, gather up the gold by the bucketful, then bring it home,” said a third. “We’ll all be rich!”

A rousing cheer erupted from the Lounge and everybody clapped. Well, not quite everybody.

“Wait a minute!” said Rachel, raising her voice above the excitement. “Don’t any of you know your history? During the Klondike gold rush of 1897, only a tiny fraction of the gold prospectors actually got rich. Everybody else found nothing and went home poorer than when they started. The smart people didn’t go looking for gold. They sold the supplies that made the

gold rush possible. They made so much money selling shovels and toothpaste, they became millionaires.”

“Are you suggesting we shouldn’t prospect for gold ourselves, but supply the prospectors instead?”

“Exactly!”

“Rachel’s right!” somebody at the front said. “While everybody is fighting to stake their claim, we could be selling them oxygen! Think of the profits!”

The villagers clapped again.

“Who are we going to send?” someone asked.

Everybody turned around and looked at me.

“I guess I could go,” I said. “At least I won’t need to take a spacesuit with me.”

“Hold on,” said Rachel. “This was my idea. I’m going too!”

“What are we waiting for?” a man shouted as he stood up and punched the air with his fist. “Let’s get started before it’s too late!”

That settled it. Rachel and I were going to the Moon to sell oxygen—and maybe shovels and toothpaste too.

Chapter 3

Building a rocket is not as easy as tying your shoelaces, but the Goldendale sky villagers went about it with unbridled determination. First, they piled into their cars and pickup trucks and hurried to the nearest Home Depot in The Dalles, Oregon. There, they fought their way through crowds of wild-eyed customers who’d had exactly the same idea: to build themselves a rocket. They snatched the last of dwindling supplies off the shelves and paid outrageously high prices for them at the counter. The experience only confirmed their suspicion that establishing a small hardware store on the Moon might be more profitable than prospecting for the gold itself. The villagers returned to GSV hours later with their vehicles groaning under the weight of plywood, sheet metal, PVC pipe, electrical wire, nuts, bolts, screws, duct tape, a porcelain toilet, power tools, and several items whose purpose I couldn’t begin to guess. Everything was unloaded at the Portal and piled into a heap. I walked around it several times, looking for anything that resembled the component of a rocket. Nothing did. Then, without much discussion, the villagers divided themselves into teams and went to work. Saws buzzed, drills whined, hammers pounded, and sparks flew. I watched with growing fascination. Either these people knew exactly what they were doing, or this was going to be the most expensive pile of worthless junk in GSV history.

Gradually—but not fast enough to anybody’s satisfaction—the rocket began to take shape. A framework of lumber and metal rose from the ground, followed by walls, floors, fuel tanks, engines, electrical systems, and a bewildering maze of pipes and wires. The porcelain



The GSV rocket under construction.

toilet disappeared inside somewhere, and I was relieved that I would never have to use it. Within a few days, the contraption was looking remarkably like a real rocket. I was impressed. At least a few of the villagers really did know something about rocket engineering.

Building the rocket was only half of the job. The other half was filling its cargo hold with the items we would be selling on the Moon. Everybody piled into their cars and pickups again and headed back to Home Depot. This time, they bought anything they thought a lunar gold prospector might need: picks, shovels, buckets, wheelbarrows, hammers, drills, extension cords, flashlights, batteries, rope, tarps, toolboxes, work gloves, and more duct tape. They also bought lumber, nails, screws, plumbing supplies, electrical fittings, and several more porcelain toilets. By the time they reached the checkout counters, their carts were overflowing and the shelves behind them were almost bare. Nobody seemed particularly concerned about what all this stuff weighed. That problem, apparently, would be figured out later.

On the day of the launch, the rocket was rolled into position and filled with enough fuel to get us to the Moon. While I watched, Rachel was fitted with a spacesuit, helmet, gloves, and boots. It took a long time to get everything just right, and I was grateful that photons didn't require any of those things. When we were ready, Rachel and I climbed aboard and strapped ourselves into our seats. The hatch was closed, the villagers withdrew to a safe distance, and the countdown began.

Ten . . . nine . . . eight . . . seven . . . six . . . five . . . four . . . three . . . two . . . one . . .
Blast-off!

The engines roared to life. The entire rocket shook violently, flames and smoke erupted beneath us, and with a tremendous rumble we lifted off the ground. Rachel was pressed back into her seat as GSV rapidly fell away beneath us. Within seconds, we were soaring high above Planet Earth, headed for space—and the greatest gold rush in history.

Chapter 4

When Rachel and I reached the Moon three days later, we landed our rocket on *Mare Serenitatis*, right in the middle of the newly discovered gold fields. We weren't the first ones there. In fact, we were lucky to find a place to land.

Rockets of every imaginable size, shape, and color were scattered across the lunar surface. Some were sleek, shiny spacecraft built by governments, big businesses, and billionaires. Others looked as though they had been cobbled together in somebody's garage from old fuel tanks, sheet metal, and plumbing supplies. One even had an antique clawfoot bathtub strapped to its side. What they planned to do with it, I couldn't imagine. Water on the Moon was almost as precious as gold.

All around the rockets, people in spacesuits were digging into the dust with picks and shovels, busily searching for buried deposits. Once in a while, somebody would make a strike and leap for joy—which, in the Moon's weak gravity, meant going much higher than they intended. Every would-be claim jumper within sight would drift closer, pretending not to be interested, until the lucky prospector noticed them and chased them away. Nobody trusted anybody. A good gold strike could make you rich, but only if you could keep everybody else from finding out about it.

Rachel and I had no plans to dig for gold. Our mission was to sell oxygen and some other supplies to the people who did. As soon as we had unloaded the rocket, we set up our store. It wasn't much to look at—a simple wooden building filled mainly with green oxygen cylinders. Customers could come in from the lunar glare and stand at a counter. They would exchange their empty cylinders for full ones, pay with gold, and be on their way. We put up a sign above the entrance which read:

GSV LUNAR SUPPLY COMPANY

When we opened for business, we were mobbed by customers. As predicted, our hottest-selling item was oxygen. Some people had traveled all the way to the Moon without bringing enough of it.

"I thought I'd find some here," explained one prospector as Rachel exchanged a fresh oxygen tank for a large gold nugget.

"Where?" she asked.

"In the air."

Rachel stared at him. "There isn't any air," she said.

"I know that now."

He grabbed his oxygen tank and hurried away.

Water was our second-best-selling item, followed by canned beans, digging tools, spacesuit patches, and duct tape. Before long, Rachel was taking orders as fast as she could write them down while I zipped back and forth between the counter and the shelves fetching things.

Within a few days, other businesses began appearing around us—a restaurant, a repair shop, a barber, an umbrella store, and a gold assay office. Perhaps the most ludicrous was a

weight-loss clinic which guaranteed its customers that they would instantly weigh 83% less. Some of the heavier prospectors were delighted with the results and gave rave reviews.

When an enterprising individual opened a saloon across the street from our store, law and order quickly deteriorated. The area began to resemble the boomtowns that sprang up in the Yukon following the discovery of gold on the Klondike River. Prospectors staggered in after a hard day of digging with bags of gold hanging from their belts. Inside the saloon, they drank, played cards, and told outrageous stories about the nuggets they had found. Fights often broke out, and looked comical in the one-sixth gravity of the Moon. A punch that found its mark could send somebody sailing for dozens of yards. One that missed could make the person throwing it spin like an ice skater.



Gold boomtown on the Moon.

One day, Rachel and I were serving customers when yet another fight broke out. A prospector came tumbling out through the saloon's batwing doors and landed in the dust right in front of us. Another one came out after him, grabbed him by the spacesuit lapels, and threw him upwards. As I was watching his graceful, slow-motion trajectory over the roof of the saloon building, I caught sight of a red and white rocket approaching from the inky blackness of space.

Rachel followed my gaze. "Looks like we've got another customer," she said.

The rocket descended toward the gold fields, firing its engines as it searched for an empty patch of ground among all the other spacecraft. It found one about two hundred yards away. After it finally landed and the dust had settled, its hatch opened.

Beetle Juice, the red photon from a quasar 12 billion light-years away, proud member of the Quasar Gang and the Magnificent Seven, stepped out onto a ramp and looked around with gleaming eyes. They looked even wilder than I remembered them, as if gold rush fever had seized his mind and was dictating his every thought. One thing was immediately clear: Beetle had come to the Moon for gold—and heaven help anybody who got in his way.

“You’d better go and say hello,” said Rachel, recognizing him immediately. “I’ll stay here and mind the store.”

Chapter 5

“Welcome to the *Mare Serenitatis*,” I said to Beetle as he descended the ramp.

“Gold!” he sniffed. “I can already smell it!”

I remembered his lust for the precious yellow stuff, and how it had been his only motivation for joining the battle against Skyglow. Now, he didn’t stand out so much—in this place where everybody lusted for gold.

“Nice rocket!” I said. “Build it yourself?”

“No, it was nailed together by the sky villagers at Chiricahua Sky Village in Arizona. Half decent job, if I might say.”

“Chiricahua Sky Village?”

“Chiricahua Sky Village and Goldendale Sky Village are sister villages,” he explained. “The winter weather is better in Arizona so they observe year-round there.”

“Are you in charge of their expedition?”

“They appointed me commander,” said Beetle, swelling with self-importance. In his right wiggle he was carrying a swagger stick—a riding crop usually carried by a military officer as a symbol of authority. He held it so it was pointing backwards behind his wiggle-pit, a pose he must have learned from some old war movie. “You see, photons weigh much less than people, so if I went, the rocket could be loaded with more gold for the return trip. I made the argument to the villagers, and they agreed. That’s what’s most important these days—to get as rich as possible.”

“You’re here alone?” I asked.

“Not quite. I brought some professional diggers.” Beetle rapped his stick against the side of his rocket. “Alpha Platoon! Form up! Time to do some prospecting!”

The hatch opened wider. A tiny tortoise in a miniature spacesuit and clear bubble helmet appeared at the top of the ramp. He was carrying a pick over one shoulder and a shovel over the other. Another tortoise appeared behind him, then another, and another, until a steady stream of them was marching down the ramp onto the Moon. There were twenty members of Alpha Platoon, each as cute as could be, with big friendly eyes, pointy snouts, and thick shells.

“The Tortoises of Chiricahua Sky Village!” announced Beetle, waving his stick around. “Best diggers in the world! They spend most of the time living underground and only come out

during the summer monsoon when it rains. Thousands of them crawl all over the place! So many, you have to watch where you're walking . . ." He cleared his throat, then added more quietly for clarification: "Not that *I* ever stepped on one."

I waved at the tortoises, and they waved back.

"Alpha Platoon!" yelled Beetle. "Form testudo!"



"Alpha Platoon! Form testudo!"

The tortoises shuffled around until their shells locked together and formed an overlapping cover as if they were preparing an attack. Then they stood still and awaited further orders.

Beetle paced back and forth in front of them. "Somewhere underneath our feet is GOLD!" he cried, jabbing the ground with his stick. "I want you to find it! I want every last nugget you can dig out of this good-for-nothing rock they call the Moon. Now start digging!"

The testudo broke up and sections marched off in different directions.

Within minutes, the lunar surface was alive with tortoise activity. Picks rose and fell. Shovels scooped up gray dust and tossed it into the air, where it hung for a few moments in the low gravity before slowly falling back to the ground. Holes began appearing everywhere. Some were shallow depressions. Others were deep enough that all I could see was the top of a tortoise's helmet bobbing up and down inside.

Beetle hurried from hole to hole. "Anything?"

The tortoise shook his head.

Beetle rushed to the next one. "Gold?"

Another shake of the head.

He hurried to a third. "Anything shiny? Yellow? Heavy? Valuable?"

The tortoise held up a gray moon rock.

Beetle snatched it from him, examined it, and threw it away.

"That's just a rock! I don't want moon rocks! I want GOLD! Keep digging!"

The tortoise dropped back into his hole.

After an hour, the ground around the CSV rocket was full of holes with piles of gray soil heaped beside them. The tortoises were digging more slowly now, and Beetle was growing more agitated.

"There has to be gold here!" he shouted. "Everybody else is finding it! Why aren't we?"

The holes became deeper and more numerous. The piles of lunar soil grew larger. Picks struck rock. Shovels scraped against the bottoms of craters. But not a single gold nugget was uncovered.

I saw one of the tortoises pause and check the gauge on the sleeve of his spacesuit. A row of ten green bars showed how much oxygen remained in his tank. Only three were still lit.

Beetle noticed the same thing. "What are you doing?" he shouted. "It's not break time yet! Keep digging!"

The tortoise shrugged and went back to work. Across the field, another tortoise checked his oxygen gauge. Two green bars remained. A few minutes later, one of them went out.

Suddenly, several of the tortoises stopped digging altogether. They stood beside their holes, looking at their oxygen gauges with concern. Only one green bar remained.

And it was blinking.

Chapter 6

The tortoises were slowing down. At first, I thought they were simply getting tired. Then I caught sight of the gauges on the sleeves of their spacesuits and saw that most of the needles were in the red.

I hurried over to Beetle, who was standing above a particularly big hole and was shouting encouragement.

"Deeper!" he yelled. "The gold is always at the bottom! Everybody knows that!"

"Beetle?"

"Not now, Squiggle. I'm supervising."

"I think you'd better check the tortoises' oxygen gauges."

"The *what*?"

"The oxygen gauges!"

Beetle mumbled something about know-nothings interfering with prospecting operations, then glanced at the nearest one. "It's fine."

"We've got needles in the red."

"Red means full."

"I'm pretty sure red means empty."

Beetle looked again. His bluster suddenly vanished. He rushed over to another tortoise and checked its gauge too. Then another. And another. All of them were in the red. The sickening truth hit him.

“They’re running out of oxygen!” he shrieked. “Nobody panic! Stay right where you are! I can handle this! I’ve been trained for just this sort of thing!”

When I saw his reaction, I snapped into crisis-management mode. “We’ve got to get your tortoises more oxygen right now!”

“Get more oxygen right now? Yes! Get more oxygen right now!”

“Beetle! Get a grip on yourself! How many tortoises did you bring with you?”

“Four hundred.”

“You brought *four hundred* tortoises to the Moon?”

“I needed diggers. More diggers, more gold.”

“I only see twenty!”

“You’re only seeing Alpha Platoon. The other platoons are still inside the rocket.”

“Oh, no! All of them must be running out of oxygen!”

Beetle’s wiggles straightened out in horror. “This is even worse than I thought!”



“The needle is in the red.”

I looked towards the supply store a couple of hundred yards away. “Rachel and I have oxygen over there,” I said.

Beetle’s eyes lit up. “Yes! Of course! I’ll buy everything you have!”

“You don’t have any gold.”

“Oh.”

“Here’s what you’re going to do, so listen closely,” I said. “Assemble all your tortoises and wait here. I’ll go and get help. Understand?”

Beetle nodded vigorously and rushed off towards his rocket. I went in the opposite direction and found Rachel at the store, busy serving customers. I took her aside and quickly explained the situation to her.

“We’ve got to do everything we can to help those poor tortoises!” she said. “Imagine how frightened they must be! Go back to them and take as many oxygen tanks as you can carry. I’ll go to the saloon and get more help. Go!”

I grabbed six tanks with my wiggles and hurried back with them. When I arrived at the rocket, Beetle was herding hundreds of tortoises out of the hatch and down the ramp. Three of the tortoises were starting to gasp for breath and I had to replace their tanks immediately.

In the meantime, Rachel ran to the saloon across the street and burst through its batwing doors.

“I need help!” she shouted above the general hubbub of drinking and gambling.

The crowd fell silent and listened.

“We have an emergency situation! Four hundred little tortoises are running out of oxygen and are in grave danger! They can have all mine at the store but it won’t be nearly enough. I need more, before it’s too late!”

Nobody said anything for a moment. Then, one of the poker players put down his cards. “What are tortoises doing on the Moon?” he calmly asked.

“They shouldn’t be here. Long story. There isn’t time to explain.”

“What do you want us to do?” asked another.

“Get whatever spare oxygen tanks you have and take them to the red and white rocket standing outside of town.”

All around the saloon prospectors looked at one another. They had crossed hundreds of thousands of miles for the chance to strike it rich. Everybody knew that giving up their spare oxygen meant giving up their dreams.

“Do they have gold to pay for it?” asked a third.

Rachel shifted uncomfortably. “No, I’m afraid not. But we can’t just let them . . . die!”

After more silence, somebody stepped forward. “I’ve got two spare tanks,” he said.

Another prospector raised his hand. “I’ve got three.”

“I’ve got one in my lander.”

“Take mine.”

“And mine.”

Suddenly, everybody was talking at once. The Great Lunar Gold Rush had come to an end . . .

. . . and the Great Lunar Tortoise Rescue had begun.

Chapter 7

Within minutes, prospectors were pouring out of the saloon and every other building around, carrying oxygen tanks. Some held them under their arms. Others dragged them through the dust. One prospector rolled three of them down the street like logs, while another had somehow managed to pile six into a wheelbarrow. In the Moon’s weak gravity, the wheelbarrow kept bouncing off the ground, sending tanks flying in every direction.

“Careful!” Rachel shouted. “We don’t want them to rupture!”

Word of the tortoise rescue spread quickly through the *Mare Serenitatis* gold fields. Soon, a steady stream of oxygen was converging on Beetle’s rocket from all directions.

Rachel took charge. "Full tanks over here!" she shouted. "Empty ones over there! Anybody who knows how to change an oxygen tank, come with me!"

By now, all four hundred tortoises were gathered around Beetle's rocket. Some stood quietly waiting. Others sat in the dust to conserve their strength. A few had pulled their heads inside their shells, which seemed like a sensible thing to do under the circumstances.

I checked the nearest oxygen gauge. The needle was almost at zero. "We need a tank over here!"

A cylinder came bouncing through the low gravity towards me. I caught it with my wiggles, pulled off the tortoise's empty tank, and connected the new one. The needle climbed out of the red.

"One safe!" I shouted.

Then another voice called out. "Two safe!"

"Three!"

"Four!"

All around me, prospectors were replacing tanks as fast as they could.

Beetle was in the thick of it, racing from tortoise to tortoise. All his swagger was gone now. So was his swagger stick.

"This one!" he shouted. "This one's almost empty!"

"Tank!"

A full cylinder came flying over. Beetle caught it and hurriedly attached it to the tortoise's spacesuit.

"Got him!"

"Next one!"

The rescue operation became a frantic assembly line. Full tanks arrived from the gold fields. Prospectors passed them forward. Empty tanks were disconnected and tossed into a growing pile. Rachel moved up and down the rows, checking gauges and sending oxygen wherever it was needed most.

For a while, it seemed as though we were winning.

Then Rachel shouted, "Squiggle!"

I hurried over.

A particularly small tortoise was lying motionless in the dust. His oxygen gauge was on zero.

Rachel dropped to her knees beside him and disconnected his empty tank. "Full tank!" she shouted.

A prospector came bounding towards us from the direction of the saloon, clutching a green oxygen cylinder against his chest. "Here's one!" he said, throwing it over.

Rachel grabbed it, connected it to the tortoise's spacesuit, and opened the valve. We all stared at the gauge. At first, nothing happened. Then the needle twitched and began to rise. A few seconds later, the tortoise moved one of his legs.

"He's going to make it!" Rachel cried.

A cheer erupted around us.

"Three hundred and twelve safe!" someone shouted.

That meant eighty-eight tortoises still weren't.

More tanks began arriving. Prospectors who had already given us their spares started taking tanks from their own rockets. Some gave us everything except the oxygen they needed to get home.

The count kept climbing.
“Three hundred and forty!”
“Three hundred and sixty-seven!”
“Three hundred and ninety!”
Only ten to go.
“Three hundred and ninety-eight!”
Two.
A few moments later, someone shouted, “Three hundred and ninety-nine!”
“One more!” Rachel yelled. “Where is he?”
“There!” Beetle shouted.
A lone tortoise was sitting beside the rocket.
I hurried over and checked his gauge. The needle was almost at zero.
“Tank!”
Rachel looked around. There weren’t any.
“We’re out!” someone shouted.
I stared at the little tortoise. After everything we had done, we were going to lose him because we were one tank short.
A nearby prospector suddenly looked towards his rocket. “Wait! I know where there’s a tank nobody needs!” He raced up his ramp and disappeared through the hatch. Seconds later, he returned carrying one that looked as if it had been taken from scuba gear.
“You were planning to go diving on the Moon?” I asked him.
The man grinned sheepishly. “That was when I thought *Mare Serenitatis* was a sea.”
I rolled my eyes. “Just give me the tank.”
I disconnected the tortoise’s nearly empty cylinder and replaced it with the full one. The needle rose, and the little tortoise looked up at us.
“Four hundred!” I shouted.
Everybody on the entire gold field broke out in cheers. People hugged one another. Empty oxygen tanks went sailing into the black sky. The tortoises began stomping their little feet.
All four hundred of them were safe.
Rachel came over and stood beside me. “Well,” she said, looking around at the piles of empty oxygen tanks, abandoned picks and shovels, and exhausted prospectors, “I guess nobody got rich.”
I looked at the four hundred tortoises around me—all of them alive and well—and said, “I wouldn’t *quite* say that.”

Chapter 8

The next morning, the Tortoises of Chiricahua Sky Village were ready to go home. All four hundred were safely aboard Beetle’s rocket, each with a full tank of oxygen strapped to his back. This time, however, Beetle wasn’t going with them. One of the prospectors—somebody who claimed to have piloted rockets professionally before the gold rush—had volunteered to take them back to Earth and deliver them safely home.

The hatch closed. A few minutes later, the engines fired and the rocket slowly lifted from the lunar surface. Rachel and I watched until it became a tiny speck of light against the blackness of space.

“They’ll be all right,” I said.

“I know.”

Beetle was standing a short distance away, looking sad and humble. “I’ll miss them,” he said with a sigh.

“What are you going to do now?” I asked.

“Go home.”

“To CSV?”

Beetle shook his head. “No. To my quasar.”

I stared at him. “But that’s twelve billion light-years away!”

“I’ve done it before.”

“You don’t have to leave because of what happened,” said Rachel. “It was just a silly mistake. Plenty of people make them during gold rushes. Just look at our scuba diver friend.”

“I want to leave,” Beetle replied. “I brought those tortoises here because I was greedy. Gold made me forget what matters. I nearly got them killed because I wanted more room in the rocket for gold instead of oxygen. I think I need some time to think about that.”

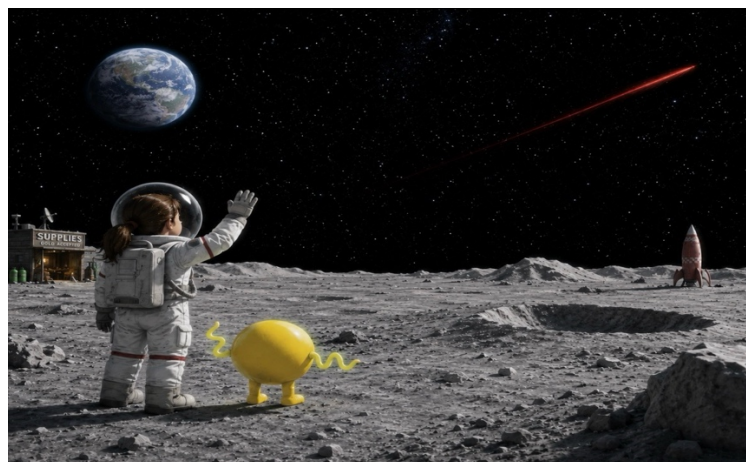
“Gold makes everybody forget what matters,” said Rachel. “Think of all the craziness on Earth that’s happening right now, with anybody with a shovel trying as hard as they can to get to the Moon. Even rational people were swept up in it, like the Goldendale and Chiricahua sky villagers. Us too!”

Beetle looked up at the black sky, then turned to me. “Goodbye, Squiggle.”

“Goodbye, Beetle. Have a safe trip.”

He saluted with a wiggle, and then he was gone. A red streak of light shot across the lunar sky and vanished into the blackness of space.

Rachel and I stayed on the Moon a little longer. After giving away practically everything in our store to save the tortoises, including a few gold nuggets, there wasn’t much left to pack. Eventually, we loaded what remained of our supplies into the GSV rocket, climbed aboard, and began the three-day journey back to Earth.



Bidding Beetle farewell.

“I’ve been thinking,” I said after we were underway. “We’re probably the only people who went all the way to the Moon during the greatest gold rush in history and came back poorer than when we left.”

Rachel looked out the window at the diminishing Moon.

“I’m okay with that.”

“So am I.”

The Great Lunar Gold Rush didn’t last much longer. The first prospectors had found enough gold to convince everybody on Earth that the Moon was full of it. It wasn’t. Over the long run, most people who went there never found anything. Those who did usually spent more getting to the Moon than the gold was worth. Before long, rockets stopped arriving. The saloon closed. The supply stores closed. The prospectors packed up their picks, shovels, wheelbarrows, scuba gear, bathtubs, and everything else they had dragged all the way from Earth and went home.

Mare Serenitatis became serene again.

When our rocket landed at Goldendale Sky Village, the villagers were waiting for us. Rachel climbed down the ramp first, and I followed. Everyone crowded around, eager to hear what had happened.

“How much gold did you bring back?” somebody shouted.

“None,” said Rachel.

The crowd went quiet. “Not even a little?”

“Not even a speck. But we did help to save four hundred tortoises.”

Nobody said anything for a moment. Then somebody started clapping. A second person joined in. Then another. Soon the whole village was applauding.

For months after the Great Lunar Gold Rush, Rachel and I would sit together on the Portal at GSV and look up at the Moon. From Earth, you couldn’t see the abandoned holes, the empty buildings, the discarded mining equipment, or any sign that thousands of people had recently been scrambling across its surface looking for gold.



Worth more than all the gold in the world.

It was simply the old Moon again—silent and beautiful.

Beetle had once called it a good-for-nothing rock. Rachel and I thought it was worth far more than all the gold we never found.

