

# Roulaboule the Explorer

By Elise Moser

Roulaboule was shooting through space in their tiny ship, watching stars fly past. So exciting! Space was even more beautiful than how it looked from the surface of their home planet, Lumaca.

Roulaboule's heart was beating inside their shell. Every Lumacan made a journey of exploration in their second year, the beginning of adulthood. When Roulaboule returned they would be greeted with flower-petal confetti and a leaf feast. But now they must keep an eyestalk on their flight. They had been assigned to explore a faraway planet, and were speeding toward it.

It was time to enter suspended animation for landing. Like hibernation, when heart and breath slowed so they could shelter in the soil through the cold season. Or estivation, which kept them from drying out during the hot season. Roulaboule's people loved moisture. When water fell from the sky they glided out and celebrated, with spiral people everywhere, all colours, sizes, patterns.

Roulaboule double-checked their galaxy map, pulled in their eyestalks, and took a last, slow breath in space.

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There was a damp, rich, loamy smell—a good beginning. Roulaboule stretched their large muscular foot, bravely popped out the dry disk sealing the ship, and sniffed. Hm. Bark, fungus, leaves of some kind... They were already starting to imagine the enthusiastic report they would give upon their return to Lumaca.

Now, it was time to explore.

They spread their foot to its full length, made some mucus to glide on, and extended their eyestalks. This planet's one sun was nudging up over the horizon. There were green plants everywhere. There was a shiny green beetle munching a leaf and a silvery web strung between twigs. Roulaboule saw that one strand was hooked around the front claw of a person with a beautiful brown-patterned back, two black eyes, and eight impressive hairy legs. The strand of silk in her claw moved and she darted into her web to capture that unwary green beetle.

Branches rustled and Roulaboule looked up to see a grey furry person bounding athletically overhead. The highest leaves were almost too high in the sky to see! Carefully, Roulaboule nibbled a nearby leaf. Hm. Much like a certain leaf that grew on Lumaca.

In the distance was a strange growling. An unfamiliar smell too, like something burning. A muffled crash, then the growly whine again.

Roulaboule elongated their body and sensed around. Suddenly, they snapped back inside their shell. Thwack! The shell was flipped over and something poked their exposed flesh. Ouch! Roulaboule squeezed fearfully farther inside.

Then...nothing. Not tasty enough? Too much trouble to extract? For whatever reason, their attacker was gone. Roulaboule stretched out of the top of their shell and down to the ground, pulling their shell safe side up.

“You got lucky. That redwing gave up easy,” said a voice. Roulaboule poked their head out and extended their eyestalks. A few shell-lengths away was a handsome yellow person clinging to the underside of a leaf, a glossy brown stripe spiralling around their shell. Just like Roulaboule!

According to the Lumacans’ origin story, every living thing on their planet came from stardust. Did they come from here? Or maybe they and the people here came from the same starclouds? They shared the same universe, after all: they were, however distantly, relations.

“Hello,” Roulaboule said.

“Woodpeckers are worrying too,” said Yellowspiral. “You’re clinging to some bark, having a snack. Wham-wham, they’re hammering away up above, and next thing you know...” Roulaboule felt a little shiver. Well, they knew there would be dangers on this journey. At least this planet had breathable air.

“You have very tall leaf-bearers. And a pleasant atmosphere.”

“Couldn’t have one without the other,” said Yellowspiral.

“Er...why?”

“The leaf-bearers create the atmosphere. They make our oxygen from sunlight.”

A brown slitherer wiggled past.

“Plus, they help manage our water. Water comes down from the sky, and the leaf-bearers drink it up through their roots. Then they pump it up through their trunks and back out into the sky through their leaves.”

How amazing that leaf-bearers could push water up so high!

“See the glitter over there, through the leaves?” Yellowspiral asked.

Roulaboule hadn’t noticed before, but there was a very big water in the distance.

“Bigtooth people use small leaf-bearers to build their lodges on the water. They also chew through big ones, eat the bark and tender inner wood. But they leave plenty standing.”

Yellowspiral glided closer.

“There are awful stories.” They lowered their speaking to a whisper. “About places where two-leggeds cut down all the leaf-bearers. Every one—a world’s worth.” Yellowspiral waved their eyestalks. “All the leaves gone. The bark, the flowers. Every nest and cozy hole destroyed. Nothing to eat, nowhere to live.”

Roulaboule gulped. What would be left if the leaves were gone? They would starve! The fur people would starve. The shiny green beetles would die, and without shiny green beetles,

the eight-leggeds would die. Without oxygen to breathe...all their relations would die.

“I just can’t imagine it,” Roulaboule said.

“It doesn’t make sense,” said Yellowspiral sadly. “Why would anyone destroy their own home?”

“It would be crazy,” Roulaboule agreed. “Plus, why would you kill so many people you weren’t even going to eat?”

Yellowspiral shrugged. “It’s probably just a story. I mean, there are lots of leaf-bearers here.”

The growly whine sound was getting louder. Roulaboule and Yellowspiral looked at each other. They glided to the edge of the land. Across the big water, some kind of loud yellow thing was destroying leaf-bearers, dropping them onto a patch of bare dirt.

Yellowspiral gasped. “Do you think that monster can swim?”

“I don’t know,” Roulaboule whispered, and shivered.

Roulaboule knew they must be brave. This was an emergency! They raised their head high, and nudged the ruffly edge of Yellowspiral’s foot with their own.

“I’ll stay,” they said. “Together, you and I and all the other people will save this beautiful planet. We must!”

Note: All the living things in this story are real (except, of course, Roulaboule) and live in the woods in Verdun, by the shore of the big water called Kaniatarowanéhne in the Kanien’kehá:ka language, the St. Lawrence River in English, and le Fleuve Saint-Laurent en français. In order of appearance, they are:

Shiny green beetle: Tiger beetle

Person with a brown-patterned back and hairy legs: Orb weaver spider

Grey furry person: Squirrel

Red-winged blackbird

Yellowspiral: Common Garden snail

Downy Woodpecker

Brown slitherer: DeKay’s brown snake

Leaf-bearers: Trees

Bigtooth people: Beavers

Two-leggeds: Humans