

3

Hooba

Space Orville spun for several moments in a frozen scream, his insides scrambled and squashed, while NeutroFuzz spiraled neon-gold flecks around him, attempting to stabilize his movement. Seconds later, the side pockets of Kahoots whispered open and wrapped Space Orville in a Breather – a sleek, snug, pressurized suit complete with a clear bulbous head covering. Gulping at the fresh air now being supplied and relaxing a bit as the pressure equalized, Space Orville now floated around in a suit of celestial saran wrap.

NeutroFuzz calmly quittered before him.

“Yeah, I’m all right now. But, man, that was close.”

He shifted his weight and spun dizzily. Okay, this is just like the Game Box, he thought. Weightlessness I can deal with. Going limp for a moment, he slowly turned his gaze until he saw what simply had to be Hooba.

Dr. Lunchwrap had called it a Nerve Banana and Space Orville could now see why. Hooba was a long, cylindrical crescent that tapered up at the ends and measured about 150 feet from tip to tip; and, sure enough, it was yellow. It hung in space some 200 yards away – a ripe fruit in a bowl of diamonds – seeming not to belong there at all.

Fizzing glints of turquoise and green, NeutroFuzz kabibbled curiously.

“I know,” Space Orville replied. “Morphean never thought of anything like that.” He regarded the queer looking lightship. “It’s a ways out there, though. We need to get closer.”

Sudden sputterings rumbled on Space Orville’s back. As he realized it was Kahoots, Space Orville was pitched forward into a quick, stomach-crunching somersault as if pushed from

behind. Whoa, he thought, scrambling for balance again. He flattened himself out to ease the roll, then thought, hey, that was propulsion. Kahoots has a jet. Another quick shove from behind scooted him farther forward, then stalled. Okay, Space Orville thought, sweeping his arms in to his sides, easy does it now. He then began to glide slowly, smoothly toward the shiny yellow ship, NeutroFuzz puppering along beside him.

As he was closing in the last several yards, Space Orville could make out more detail in the Nerve Banana. A round bulge lined with a dark, oblong window protruded from the lower right side of the ship; that had to be the bridge, and its presence was the only way to tell the front end of the craft from the back. No other windows ran along this side of the ship, and Space Orville expected the other side to be smooth and seamless as well. He was now quickly approaching the gleaming yellow hull and, just as he was about to smack gracelessly into the side of the ship, a dark round aperture slowly rolled open before him. He and NeutroFuzz sailed straight on into Hooba's airlock.

As the aperture wheezed shut, Space Orville heard the rushing pulse of decompression. Once the pressure had equalized, the silvery saran wrap suit around him unfolded itself and, crinkling like plastic fire, drew back into Kahoots. Then, with a whoosh, a massive door slid open onto the strange halls of Hooba.

Space Orville poked his head out and glanced both ways; soft, silvery-amber light glowed within the sparse and rather narrow hall, and a strange hissing tick whispered in the air. Space Orville could swear he smelled fresh vanilla. He stepped cautiously out of the airlock, keeping a hand on the smooth, cool wall.

“Hello?”

His greeting bounced back at him and faded down the corridor. NeutroFuzz quickly

tiggered around his head, then beegled a blazing orange behind him. Space Orville heard a brief whir, then a soft thud. He spun around and glanced down at what had to be an escapee from an ancient fairy tale.

Standing no more than four-foot-one, the stout little man in the green chain-mail armor unsheathed a short, gleaming sword, thrust it ceremoniously into the air over his head and hollered, “Yo, ho! Space Orville! NeutroFuzz! Welcome to Hooba!”

The little man artfully sheathed his sword and bowed deeply at Space Orville, who was doing his level best not to bust out laughing.

Rather, he cleared his throat and asked, “Mr., um, Earlobe?”

“Just Ivan, that’ll be,” he said, straightening up. A dark yellow tunic was rumpled beneath the green chain-mail and a velvety purple cloak hung over his right shoulder from a large gold brooch in the shape of a tortoise. He wore loose fitting black pants that tucked into pointy, green leather boots. His white beard hung to the middle of his broad chest and a long, white braid of hair fell down his back from beneath a silver helmet decorated with two white horns.

Ivan Earlobe was, by far, the most unusual man Space Orville had ever encountered.

“Ye’ll want to be comin’ with me, then, eh?” Ivan said, turning on his heel and proceeding to march off down the hall. “That’ll be this way.”

Space Orville glanced wide-eyed at NeutroFuzz, who wibbled in return.

“I’ll say,” Space Orville said, jogging off to catch up with Ivan.

Ivan spoke in a mountainous voice, heavy with a rich, old brogue. “It’s Dr. Lunchwrap, it is, tells me yer the one off to recover Miles O’Teeth. Weezle Bums got him, they do. Nasty lot, them.”

He turned a sharp left, never slowing his pace. Space Orville trailed behind, still smelling

vanilla. “Yeah, so I’ve heard. The doc says you can help us track them down.”

“Hooba, aye. We’ll get ye there. But not without at least a hop.”

They stopped at a cream-colored door set in the silvery-beige wall. “We get to hop universe layers?”

“Oh, aye, about one. But it’s no puddle jump. Mind yer wary of the goofy bugs.”

As that bizarre non sequitur was trying to sink in, the door hushed open and Ivan strode onto the bridge. Space Orville, blinking in disbelief, followed.

The scent of vanilla was strongest here, and there was an underlying waft of pineapple. Still, Space Orville was unaware of his stomach rumbling as he entered the bridge.

While obviously a masterpiece of mechanization, the room seemed somehow completely organic. A long window ran the length of the semicircular outer wall, spilling in starlight and black. Running beneath the window was a tangerine-hued control panel that seemed to grow out of the wall; it glistened smoothly under the soft coconut-colored lights of the room. Rather than crude mechanical dials, levers and switches, the controls on the panel were little more than raised bulges and blobs humping up out of the surface; they varied in size from thumbnail to dinner plate and in color from green apple to strawberry red.

Scanning the room, Space Orville also noticed five soft looking, high-backed chairs growing up out of the floor like big, comfy toadstools. These seats surrounded another mushroom-like growth arrayed with bulbous controls that encircled a shiny black surface.

Ivan walked to the forward control panel beneath the window and began to move his hands purposefully over the curious bulbs; some he mashed upon forcefully, others he gently caressed. Space Orville felt and heard a series of groans, thumps, rumbles and tremors as Hooba awoke for duty.

“Ye can be makin’ yerself comfortable now,” Ivan said, turning from the forward panel and coming toward Space Orville. Looking him over, Ivan commented, “I see the doctor’s left ye well equipped.”

“Huh?”

“Kahoots. Ye’ve got a Kahoots. Handy, that. Cerebellumate’s a regular lifesaver, eh?”

“Sarah who?”

“Come now,” Ivan chided, taking a seat around the mushroom table. “The cerebellumate. Ye feel it sticking to the back of your head? Kahoots, see, knows what’s on yer mind. Haven’t ye talked to her yet?”

“Well no, I . . .” Then Space Orville remembered floating in space and thinking about how to approach Hooba. Kahoots had suddenly kicked into life and fired propulsion jets that brought him gently to the ship.

“You know,” Space Orville said, “I guess I have.”

“‘Course ye have. Ye can’t not. Kahoots’ll always meet what needs she can. That’s why she’s handy.”

NeutroFuzz miffled greenly.

“Oh, no offense now, NeutroFuzz. I know yer handy, too. In fact, I’ll have ye kick on the periscreen here, if ye’d be so kind.”

Bizzling agreeably, NeutroFuzz swooped down, hovered inches over dark surface of the mushroom table and wiffled a pale blue fizz. The circular screen on the table surface responded with a deep green glow behind which a series of geometric patterns began to emerge. The patterns collected themselves into a three-dimensional grid laced with dozens of cubed quadrants.

“That’s a good Fuzz. I thank ye now,” Ivan said, leaning in toward the screen as NeutroFuzz speeled off, wheebling.

“Be sittin’ now, too, Space Orville, and have a see.”

Space Orville obediently sat opposite Ivan and gazed into the grid. “What’s there to see?”

“Aye, plenty there is,” Ivan said. As he continued, he moved his hands over the soft, round controls as he had done at the forward panel. With each touch, the now holographic gridwork shifted, moved and enlarged to emphasize Ivan’s explanations.

“The Weezle Bums are off to a lively start. They’ve got Miles on board their ship, the Durl Murki. Built like it sounds, that. A regular bucket o’ rust.”

On screen, there appeared the image of a ship slightly larger than Hooba but nowhere near as sleek. Not sleek at all, in fact. The Durl Murki was a floating eyesore; a cubist nightmare; a random collection of boxy angles and square, jutting appendages with a dry, drab metallic surface of dark gray and dirt brown.

“Yipes,” said Space Orville. “That hardly even looks spaceworthy.”

“Oh aye, but it is. And she’s been known to take off at a clip when the Weezle Bums give her the goose. Ugly’s the biggest thing working against her. That and a megadrive system darn near older than I am.”

Space Orville tugged lightly on his gold hoop earring. The door was open now, so he just had to ask. “Just how old is that?”

“I lost count ‘round a hundred and nine and that may have been years ago. But age itself is an irrelevant detail – it’s just a matter of knowing where ye’ve been. The only difference between age and ageless is how ye feel about what ye’ve done.”

Ivan tapped a gnarled finger on a carrot-colored bulb and the image of the Durl Murki faded

as the geometric quadrants reappeared.

“Now then. The Weezle Bums are on their way home with the goods. That’ll be Brox, an unsightly little planet on the outskirts of the Kar-Mel system.”

A small, brownish planet now rotated on the screen in the far corner of one of the quadrants.

“The Kar-Mel system’s in the 10th layer. That’s just a hop away. We’ll come out a ways behind ‘em, but Hooba’s got legs the Durl Murki could only hope for. Once we hop the 10th, we’ll be caught up soon enough.”

As the images faded again, Space Orville asked, “What can I do?”

A swollen thud suddenly shuddered the bridge and echoed out toward the walls followed by a twittering whir that rose in pitch until it disappeared altogether. Space Orville sat clutching the arms of his chair, but Ivan rose calmly and walked to the forward panel.

“Well, now that Hooba’s wide awake, ye can sit back, relax and get ready to hop. Drum your fingers on the plum-colored mound there. That’ll strap ye in.”

Spying the soft, plum hump on the table, Space Orville tentatively reached out and drummed his fingers on it. Instantly, two wide straps sprouted from the chair and crossed over his chest. A hint of maple hung in the air under Space Orville’s nose.

“Ivan, I’m not quite sure I get this ship. All of the controls are soft and bumpy and I keep catching whiffs of these sweet, homey smells.”

Ivan was sitting back down. Drumming his fingers to strap himself in, he said, “I doubt ye’d know anything like it. Hooba’s beyond yer garden variety, quasidimensional lightship, aye. She’s also symbiorganic. How d’ye suppose she got to be the Nerve Banana?”

“I still don’t get it.”

“On Earth, ya see, ye grow yer food and harvest it to eat, although, sadly, ye’ve got away

from growing it in the ground. That's hydroponics for ye. We Therians have another system entirely. Our home evolved a bit differently, see? We've no need to make unnatural use of the land, or synthesize whatever can't be found natural. We've never taken what we needed out of the land without giving it all back. Therefore, our land is always happy to give us what we need, be that food, shelter or transport."

"Are you saying you grew this ship out of the ground?"

"That's a way to look at it, aye. Our needs don't come from without; they come from within. Respectin' that has allowed our technology to stay not only simple, but 100% natural."

NeutroFuzz terraddled a pinkish violet while Space Orville shook his head in an attempt to let all this information sift down.

Ivan chuckled. "Don't panic. Our end of the 7th layer grew up a might different from yer end of the 5th. Ye can't expect all life to be like life on Earth, now, can ye?"

"Now relax, then. We're at time to make the hop. There's a bit of a bounce, but not that'll rattle ye much."

With the heel of his hand, Ivan gently whacked a deep blue bulge on the table. There was, indeed, a bit of a bounce, as if they had struck something soft. Through the window, it appeared as if the skin of space were stretching slowly outward; Space Orville imagined this must be what it was like to collide with a colossal water balloon.

Then, with the sound of a muffled pop turned inside out, the window suddenly filled with pale blue light and Hooba surged forward. There was a rapid, ticklish, free-falling sensation and Space Orville winced at the brightness, blinking at the strange orange patterns that danced before his eyes.

"There they are," said Ivan.

“There who are?” Space Orville asked, still trying to shake the light dazzle from his eyes.

“Goofy bugs.”

Space Orville realized that he hadn't just been dazzled by the sudden change in the light. Outside, twirling insanely in the pale blueness, were hundreds of brilliant orange shapes. Each shape was an amoebic, closed figure composed of tiny pinpoints of wild electric orange; each figure spun and whirled open and closed, around and around with maddening speed. At first, it tickled his eyes to watch, but after a moment, it was completely disorienting.

“Those are the goofy bugs?”

“Aye. Orange Transdimensional Goofy Bugs. They live here between universe layers and generally just make a nuisance for those hopping through. Mind ye don't look too long, though. They may be harmless, but if yer not careful, they can slip into yer field of vision and stick with ye and that's somethin' ye'll not be wantin'. They're a tough shake.”

“I can imagine,” Space Orville said, averting his eyes from the dancing goofy bugs. He imagined having two or three of these caught in your eyes would be like having someone follow you around with a vibrant strobe light.

Hooba glided on through the dazzle of goofy bugs until, soon enough, there was another soft thump; the other side of the water balloon, thought Space Orville. Looking up at the window, he saw the goofy bugs were gone and the pale blueness of the space between the layers began to stretch outward. Then, with another muffled, inverted pop, Hooba quietly plunged into the starry blackness of the 10th layer.

Space Orville noticed immediately that the stars were completely different here. Alien constellations formed strange new patterns in the satin blackness and, far off to the left, he could see a foggy blue nebula shifting lazily among the stars.

Ivan hopped to his feet and gazed out the window.

“Not so bad, then, was it? No goofy bugs got ye, did they?”

“I don’t think so,” Space Orville said, blinking to make sure his vision was clear.

Ivan had turned back to the table saying, “From here, the Weezle Bums are only about half a unit off down the road. We give Hooba the juice and we’ll close that gap in about two ticks, eh?”

“But how far is a unit? We’re in deep space. Shouldn’t we be travelling in parsecs or something?”

“Well now, being as yer average parallax second is about three and a quarter light years, or close to 19 trillion miles, and yer astronomical unit is a paltry 93 million, I’m thinkin’ we’re better off runnin’ units over parsecs, aren’t ye?”

Space Orville shrugged. Parsecs just sounded so much cooler than units.

A throbbing hum began to shake through the bridge and the coconut-colored light pulsed intermittently brighter. Hoots and whistles bounced around the room like overzealous owls at a ringball game.

Ivan spun toward the window and hollered over the din, “Well feather me bed. If it isn’t a passing fancy of Timewinders. And never a moment too soon. Come have a see.”

Space Orville followed Ivan’s pointing finger out the window toward what had been the foggy blue nebula. The nebula had coalesced into a long, vibrant, blue-white, spiraling cone that was currently racing toward Hooba.

Ivan slapped at a bright orange mound on the forward control panel and the alarms faded. Moving his hands rapidly over the bulbous knobs, he called out, “Quickly here, Space Orville. I’ll learn ye how to hitch a ride on a passing fancy.”

Space Orville trotted over to the forward panel. At Ivan's touch command, two sturdy pink backboards had grown up from the floor before the panel, which now sprouted a new set of odd, tubular controls.

"Against the board and grab a handle, now. Ye'll need to be using manual controls. Have ye ever leaped from a runaway cloud surfer?"

"No."

"Well, this isn't much like it. What about parasailing? Have ye heard of it?"

"It sounds familiar."

"Well, that's a good place to start."

Ivan braced himself against his own backboard and continued, "On my mark, now, slowly squeeze the lever before you on the right and ease it forward. See how the fancy moves and ye'll catch on what happens."

Space Orville watched as the long, spinning cone tore silently through space at them, brilliant glints of white and blue sparking from its surface. As it neared, Space Orville could make out individual shapes; the cone was not actually a solid but was composed of hundreds of much smaller cones, each of which spun faster than the whole, and the entire structure seemed filled with effervescent bubbles. This passing fancy, as Ivan had called it, was going to miss Hooba's nose by inches if they were lucky.

As the window filled with the dazzling sparks of the furiously spinning cones, Ivan hollered, "Mark!"

Space Orville was beginning to understand. As he squeezed the lever and eased it forward, he saw several whisper-thin, bright green streaks shoot out toward the fancy from Hooba's nose. The green streaks wrapped loosely around the entire fancy of cones and hung for a moment

before they pulled taut with a jerk. Space Orville knocked his head against the backboard as Hooba was yanked forward, now being towed rapidly along by the conical collection of deep space fireworks. Space Orville's stomach flattened against the back of his spine and his face felt stretched like warm taffy. It was, all in all, a rather exhilarating rush.

“What did you say this thing was?”

“A passing fancy of Timewinders, it is. Timewinders, ye know, do just what they say; they wind time. They keep the universe moving forward at a constant rate. If it weren't for them, time itself would likely fly off in any direction. It's a mighty job and it takes the lot of them to do it, so they always travel in packs called fancies. Hats off to ya, Space Orville. Ye've managed to hitch us a ride that'll have us to the Durl Murki in less than a shake.”

Space Orville was still clutching the lever and staring, wide-eyed, as the stars rushed past them in a blur. This was just like “Millennium Fastback”, one of the earlier Morphean games at which he was quite good. The lever was simply an old-fashioned joystick with which to control the ride. Seeing the stars whiz by, he instinctively eased the lever back a bit to try to control his speed.

At once, a roaring groan tore through the bridge. Ivan yelled, “No! Wait! What are ye doing?”

“Relax, I know what I'm doing. It's just like this game I used to play. I'm good at it, too. I need to ease back here before we lose control.”

“But ye don't control the Timewinders any more than ye control time at all. Ye ride with them 'till ye can let go.”

But Space Orville wasn't listening. He continued to pull back on the lever until he, too, became aware of Hooba's moaning alarms. He just had time to realize that maybe this wasn't at

all like Millennium Fastback before there was a thunderous snap that rattled his bones.

Suddenly, he was flying through the cabin, flailing his arms. NeutroFuzz was gabbling in panic and Ivan collided with the ceiling. Space Orville smacked into a soft wall and gulped hard as the room spun end over end in a churning lurch.

Eventually, the spinning slowed and Hooba stabilized itself. Space Orville gaped at a hazy white gauze that now shrouded the window. Beyond the gauze, the back end of the Timewinders quickly disappeared from view.

The bridge was now silent save for Ivan's groaning, which came from under the forward panel; Space Orville stood slowly and staggered over toward him. NeutroFuzz wimped quietly in one corner of the bridge.

Stooping to give Ivan a hand up from beneath the panel, Space Orville said, "Ivan, I'm really sorry about all that. What happened? Did our lines break?"

Ivan stood, brushed himself off and rearranged his cape. "Aye, I should say. The orbitethers we hitched to the Timewinders weren't built to take that sort of strain. There's something to say for trusting yer instincts, Space Orville, but ye've got to know first what instincts to trust. Foolhardy and reckless, that was."

Turning from Space Orville, Ivan looked at the window and noticed the milky film that glazed their view. He uttered a low, pathetic moan.

"Ah, no."

"What?"

"Aye, it's worse than I thought. Ye notice how the view's not so good anymore?"

"Yeah."

"When the orbitethers gave, we obviously tumbled back and wound up in the wake."

“The wake?”

“The wake of the Timewinders. Not a rosy place. Come.”

Ivan led them back to the mushroom table and called up another three-dimensional image. What Space Orville saw was a pale, thin strip twisted around into a slowly twirling figure eight.

“What’s that?”

“That, dear lad, is a Moby. A narrow strip of infinity. Timewinders leave ‘em in their wake. Ordinarily, they’re no danger. It’s mighty hard to get stuck in one; takes quite a bit of force. But, once you’re in, it’s near impossible to get out.”

“What do you mean? Why can’t we get out? Doesn’t Hooba have enough power?”

“Power isn’t the problem. Consider infinity, Space Orville. Consider all time and space condensed and wrapped into a narrow band. An infinite progression in all directions. Now, ye know what ye need to get anywhere, don’t ye?”

“Um . . .”

“A starting point, lad. From here in the middle of a Moby, we’ve simply no place to start from, so we can’t begin to escape. We’d have to find a starting point and that could take forever.”

“But why can’t we just start from where we are? Start from here?”

“‘Cause there is no ‘here’ in a Moby. There’s only everywhere.”

Space Orville flumped down in one of the cushiony seats. “Whoa,” he said softly.

Ivan puffed his bearded cheeks and blew out a stream of air. “Whoa, indeed,” he said, sitting down himself.

“So, what do we do now?” Space Orville asked.

Ivan laughed sharp and ruefully. “Now? We’re stuck in a Moby. ‘Now’ is another luxury

we no longer have.”

The two of them stared quietly at the twisting image of the figure eight displayed on the table while NeutroFuzz whussled a silent beige nearby.

“This,” Ivan said, “is going to require some serious thought.”