

Yaz

Conrad was either thirteen or fourteen minutes into his morning walk when he noticed a far-off speck growing against a clear sky. When he used to time it out, this clearing was one of his time-taking landmarks, the second of six (between his entrance at the trail's 7 mile marker and the fork which went off towards York Elementary), and generally he hit it somewhere between the thirteen and fourteen minute marks, fourteen if his head was clear or if he was deep in happy thought, thirteen if he was deep in unpleasant thought. He started the trek heading Westbound, so the sun in the 7:00 hour would hit him from behind, avoiding that dreaded moment of glare overtaking his eyes, or at least putting it off for around twenty to twenty-two minutes until he left the woods at the end of his route.

Unburdened by any glare, he liked to look upwards once he neared the clearing, letting the sky overcome his field of vision. It was very blue – not exactly the blue referred to as “Sky Blue” in the Crayola sixty-four pack, though it never exactly was, something that he'd noticed in childhood – and very clear.

But not perfectly clear. An airplane or something, he figured. A news helicopter, maybe, though he figured he'd be able to hear one of those. An animal, maybe? Was it a trick of the perspective? Against the background of the Earth's atmosphere he could've been misjudging it. It didn't fly like any animal he knew, but he didn't know that many flying animals.

It looked to be growing larger, initially a beneficial development as Conrad was able to better determine its general shape: cylindrical at the very least, with something more flexible at its top, almost like if the balloon and the basket parts of a hot air balloon were one single entity, but that also must've meant it was getting nearer, and, again the endless perspective behind him robbed him of any specificity regarding this, but it looked to be doing so quite rapidly.

But not *unintentionally* rapidly. It didn't look like it was in freefall, he thought. He'd only seen one air accident in his life, the same one everyone else saw replayed over and over again on TV about a week and six years prior to this morning, but he thought any sort of aircraft – or any object for that matter – in freefall would've been moving much more quickly, he thought, again only drawing from how the two buildings that had succumbed to unfettered gravity that he'd seen on TV in the same incident looked. This didn't seem quite as fast as that.

It was coming down with some speed, and what got him to fully stop in his tracks were the number of details he was starting to be able to recognize: a matte gray in color, four little legs sticking off of the bottom of it, four or five rungs running vertically around it. It looked to be about the size of one of those portable toilets you'd see at a construction site, except with a flappy balloon thing coming off of its top. These details puzzled him enough to let his desire to focus on the object snuff out any desire that might've been prompted him to evade it, an exigence which didn't even cross the back of his brain until it became clear the thing was going to come to a landing something like ten to fifteen yards away from him within the clearing.

It fell with what he didn't judge to be grace – he struggled even to define it as intent – but it didn't seem to be falling without some control, some sort of hovering or at least resistance against the wind, like one of those BASE jumpers he'd seen on MTV Sports some years past. It hit the ground with a loud enough sound to break his stupor and push that exigence to escape the clearing right to the front of his brain before the valves on those vertical rungs started spewing steam and the siding between two of those rungs retracted and he made out a silhouette of something within, which really brought that exigence towards escape out of the front of his brain and down his spine and then down his arms and legs – he turned around only for the sound of the steam hissing from the object to be broken by a voice, yelping “Hey! Hold on, sir! Wait!”

He got about two awkward strides out before stopping himself. Was that English? It was clearly English. He didn't expect that to come from the object, the craft, he supposed he could call it, it was carrying a person, presumably. The voice carried an accent he hadn't heard in a while, it very softly hit the 'r' in sir, like that old Mid-Atlantic gentry dialect he'd heard from George Plimpton or Kelsey Grammer. It couldn't have been an alien craft, then, he figured – he noticed that he hadn't let himself even consider that it was an alien craft until he determined it wasn't one. Maybe it was a military experiment, maybe the Navy or Coast Guard, there's a big Navy presence in New England, which could explain the guy's accent, maybe it was the fruits of some of that well-moneyed research done at Harvard or Yale. He'd seen all those Travel Channel and Discovery Channel shows debunking UFO sighting after UFO sighting with "it was probably a weather balloon," and he figured this was no different.

The figure stepped out of the craft, coughing his way through and trying to wave the steam away from him. It was a human, of average size, Caucasian complexion, floppy brown hair, he looked like a very normal guy, wearing pleated khakis and a mostly properly fitting gray dress shirt, and with a few steps forward Conrad determined the guy wore black sneakers, probably Vans. With a mustache he could've passed for a Let It Be era George Harrison. He beamed at Conrad as he approached and jerked his hand up to wave at him.

"Hello!" The guy yelled, at a volume uncomfortably high for Conrad, but he figured the guy's hearing had gone through some distress in the crash. "Please don't be afraid, I promise that I come in peace!"

Neither of those phrases tended to elicit the desired outcome. The guy held off on continuing, leaving space for Conrad that he had no words to fill leaving a lingering silence only broken by the weakening hiss of the steam still coming from the valves on the craft.

"This is embarrassing, I'll admit. This is my first time coming here, to Earth, I mean, and I made some crucial mistakes that put me here. The most significant, all things considered, was a failure to recognize how much drag your planet's atmosphere would put on my craft, which meant I used up more of my ship's battery than I intended to in order to right myself, which might not have been such an issue had I put in the correct coordinates for where I wanted to land."

Conrad didn't respond verbally, but he figured the look on his face communicated his confusion enough.

"You see, I didn't intend to land here. My ship took me here, as I told it to come here, but... and this is embarrassing, old scatterbrained me..." he rubbed the back of his neck with his right hand and looked to the ground. "I needed, ideally, to speak with someone with deep knowledge of your society, I figured someone in power would be ideal, so I tried to set course for the capital city of the most powerful country on this planet, which we determined through our reconnaissance is the city named Washington within the District named Columbia in the country named 'The United States of America.' All my superior officers kept telling me: 'Don't make the mistake everybody makes, there's two Washingtons that'll come up in the database, don't go to the wrong Washington.'"

The man had taken up a sort of Italian Brooklynite accent to depict his superior officers, Conrad noticed. "'The ship's navigational system will try to steer you to a county named Columbia in the State of Washington, but you want the city of Washington in the District of Columbia.' So I focused on that, you understand... I kept repeating 'Columbia, Columbia, Columbia' to myself... and of course I'm focused on not choosing the *county* of Columbia that I trick myself into picking the *city* of Columbia, and I think the system is confused about it, if I remember right, you've only the single district in this country, correct?"

Conrad nodded back. Putting aside the overarching illogic of the man's claims, he could see where the man's conundrum led him.

“Yes, I think that was the problem, our system prioritizes districts over states, as my home country’s sort of the reverse of that, only two states and more districts... regardless, I was so focused on Columbia that I disregarded the state listed alongside it. Of course I notice that I’ve picked the wrong place the moment after the ship takes off and I can’t take control back over until I’m through the atmosphere, but of course by the time I’m through the atmosphere I’m nearly out of battery, and I have to make a landing here in this clearing in the woods and now I’m speaking with you here in the city of Columbia in the state of Missouri in the country of the United States of America.”

Conrad nodded again. The man paused as if expecting Conrad to say something in response, as if Conrad could have something to say in response to this person stating so matter-of-factly in plain English a malfunction with his spaceship caused him accidentally to land in Columbia, Missouri.

The man, recognizing Conrad’s silence, continued. “You are a Columbian, correct?”

Conrad had to process the question for a moment, having never thought of the town’s demonym once in the near-decade he’d been there, before nodding again.

“I looked the city up via your internet, I believe the site I used was called the ‘Wikipedia’, on the way here, out of curiosity and boredom I suppose, not a lot to do cooped up in that big metal can on these lengthy voyages. You call yourselves ‘Columbians’, the city is either ‘CoMo’ or ‘The Athens of Missouri,’ Seat of Boone County, home of The University of Missouri and the Tigers of intercollegiate athletics, the city from which best-selling musical duo ‘Hootie and the Blowfish’ hails, correct?”

“They’re actually...” Conrad realized first that this would be an overwrought two-part correction and contemplated how to formulate it. “They’re from a different college town named Columbia, that one’s in South Carolina, and also...” at this point, he recognized how stupid it might seem to waste time correcting this person, clearly human, claiming to be basically a space alien, on the semantics of a mediocre mid-1990s Jam Band from another college town with the same name, “uh, they’re a four-piece group, it’s just a weird name they picked, uh, the main guy, Darius, he gets mad if you call him Hootie.”

“I see.” responded the man.

“Sorry,” started Conrad. “Where did you say you came from?”

“Oh! My goodness, in my haste and embarrassment, I’ve forgotten my manners. I’ve been told this might happen, what with the ease of communication between Anglophone Earthlings and us – ‘you start talking and you forget they’re from a damn different galaxy!’” He said, again affecting the Brooklyn accent. “I am on a reconnaissance mission, to gather information upon and study the development of your planet. I am a Cosmonautic Field Researcher for the Interspace Aeronautics Guild of my home nation, the Districted Federation of Daikatana, on my home planet of Millencolin.”

It was at this point, hearing the guy claim a mediocre computer game and a late-1990s punk band to be his home country and planet, that Conrad began to suspect he was subject to a ruse. The man stuck his hand out to shake and Conrad reciprocated, noting the claimed alien’s loose grip and wobbly arm.

“I’m, uh, I’m Conrad...” immediately upon finishing his first name he concluded that he should’ve thought of a fake name, but had no time to undo the statement of his real first name nor the time to think of a fake surname. “Conrad Mannion.”

“Hello, Conrad Mannion!” The man had not stopped shaking his hand, well past the point wherein most people would’ve stopped. Conrad figured it could reflect either an alien aware of the concept of hand-shaking as a greeting but unaware of how to practice it properly or some prick giving him the dead

fish and holding it out too long as a sign of disrespect, about to spring that he'd been fucking with Conrad all along. "It is a pleasure to meet you! My name is Viagra Yazool!"

There it was. Erectile dysfunction medication and a mid-80s sophisti-pop act, the guy claimed his name to be. Conrad brought his hand back to his side. "Sorry, but... you're fucking with me, aren't you?"

The man stepped back, acting as if he'd been offended by the question. "Fucking with you, sir, goodness, no!"

Conrad couldn't help but hear everything the guy said as sarcastic mocking at this point, the high-class Kelsey Grammer accent only worsened it. "If you are, then... fine, whatever, you got me." Conrad shrugged as the man's face turned even further to confusion. "Maybe you're some rich upper-crust Yalie with some prototype aircraft coming to Missouri to mock me or whichever the first of us naive, midwestern, backwater, public school bumpkins you think populate this town you came across was. If that's the case, then, congratulations."

He pointed towards the vessel the man had arrived in on. "I gotta say, that's a very impressive ship you've got. A lot of *good* you could probably do with it, how quickly it moves and maneuvers and everything, better than anything I've ever seen before. I could see a lot of *positive* uses for that – But I guess I can't be surprised you'd use it to pick on people with less than you, seems to be all you fuckers do. Christ, we have to deal with one of you in the fucking White House already, bombing all over the Middle East and flooding cities and jerking off in coffins for fraternity hazings and everything, you think people like me haven't had enough of people like you already?"

In the haze of indignation that had overcome Conrad, he missed both the man bringing a trembling hand up to cover his mouth and the glassy sheen that had developed over his eyes. "S-sir, mister, Conrad, I... Clearly I haven't made myself clear enough to you. Am I correct, y-you think I'm lying to you?"

"Yeah. Correct. I'm kind of starting to fucking suspect as much, man. You probably would've had me for longer if you'd picked something other than boner pills to be your first name. You're trying to Marty McFly me, right? You're doing a 'Darth Vader sent me from the planet Vulcan' thing, right? Millencolin, that's good, that's subtle, I've basically forgotten about them, might've flown under my nose with Daikatana, too, if I hadn't wasted weeks of my sophomore year of college trying to convince myself that John Romero *was* a genius and I *hadn't* wasted fifty bucks I could've spent on Quake III like all of my friends did. You would've got most people with that one. But Viagra? Come on, too easy. Next time you try this, like if you wanna go mess with the people up in Ames, or Lawrence, or, well, fuck, I don't know how much of the Big XII you've covered by this point, pick something less obvious and you might string them along for a bit longer. Maybe, I don't know, dress up like an alien and try to shed your Ivy League dialect, too."

The man had started pacing, wiping at his upper cheeks with his fingers, his eyes reddened, "Oh, no, no, no... They – They warned me this might happen if someone saw my ship land. I didn't prepare for this, we're supposed to land outside of the range of human contact and blend in once we reach society. There's no protocol for what I'm doing here, and... and clearly I've failed in some aspects." He shook his head and looked at his feet. "It's a blessing and a curse that we learned of this planet. We're so similar that it makes reconnaissance so much more feasible than anywhere else but it's always those little things, those small differences, which catch us. I just never thought the names would do it."

Conrad was left dumbfounded by the guy's continued insistence.

"Okay. If you believe that I'm pulling some sort of ruse, I can see how. It's an extraordinary situation I've placed you in, and if you feel you'd rather simply walk away from me and think I'm a dishonest – What

was it you said, Yalie? – then I understand. But please, if you give me the chance to explain myself, I promise I'll do as much as I can to explain myself.”

“Alright.” Said Conrad, cognizant of his lack of anything better to do that morning, still kept in a suspension of disbelief by the memory of the otherworldly movement of the ship.

“We have, at the IFG, excellent research and development which has benefitted our reconnaissance and exploration efforts. After a years-long search all over the universe, we came to discern that this planet, Earth, within the orbital system Sol, in the Milky Way galaxy, was a nearly exact match for ours. We researched trillions and trillions of planets, and this one is nearly identical regarding landmasses, era of creation, climates, ecosystems of flora and fauna, as well as, of course, human development. It would seem truly uncanny that a world so very similar to yours would exist out there, but once we understood how significant certain factors are in societal development and the sheer number of life-supporting planets out there, it makes sense. We are nearly identical. I've read into your planet's history, ours are strikingly similar – Crusades, genocides, wars, messiahs, all similar but under different names. We developed the same language, and similar dialects, though mine takes a different name from yours and at the risk of potentially further angering you, I shall not name it.

“We are nearly the same, your planet's society and my planet's society are nearly mirrored, save for a few proper nouns and... well, intergalactic travel. And that's what brings me here. We are so similar, and yet, us Millencollinites are both aware of you and able to travel here, and you Earthlings are... well, you aren't. I'm part of a reconnaissance mission to try to determine what developed here in the stead of the intergalactic travel which did on my planet. I recognize that it sounds absurd to you in concept, even moreso in specific.” He exhaled hard and made eye contact with Conrad. “But I need you to believe me.”

A cold rush slipped down Conrad's spine, for a moment all cynicism and pretense he'd built up had been erased by a phrase evoking a feeling he understood too well. From the iron focus of the alien's eyes he felt a very human sort of empathy. ‘I need you to believe me’ – how many times had he said it? – the memories flooded through him in succession: Standing in his childhood backyard trying to explain to his parents that a baseball had flown in from somewhere far outside of the yard and broke the kitchen window, sitting at his desk in the third grade having projectile vomited on the speckled carpet beside him during free reading period after failing to convince his father that he was nauseated that morning from tainted mozzarella in the stuffed crust of a Pizza Hut specialty pizza from the night prior, getting unceremoniously fired by his first boss as a teenager after pleading to him that he wasn't the one taking bills out of the cash register.

“Okay,” said Conrad, with a nod and an interior tamping down of the alarm bells set off by the inherent absurdity of everything. “I'll believe you. I'll help you. Frankly, I have nothing much better to do today, anyway. What do you need from me?”

The alien smiled. “My ship's battery will be fully recharged in about four hours. In the meantime, I feel that I should at least try to ensure this whole trip wasn't a waste. I suppose the best I can do with the time that I have is to observe the typical life of an average person in the meantime and try to discern something from it myself. Would you consider yourself an average person?”

“Yes, I think I consider myself as much.” His first instinct was to take offense to the question, but Conrad had spent the prior year of his life grappling with and painfully (initially painfully, though his acceptance brought an incredible catharsis) coming to grips with the reality that he was indeed an average person with a relatively average life. “If you want to observe my life, you'll probably end up bored and probably won't find that much in terms of societal difference. Today's my day off, so my only plans after this were to stay home and watch football on TV, then make dinner with my girlfriend, Allison.”

“Absent someone in a position of societal observance, perhaps someone in political leadership or a professor, I feel that observing an average fellow like yourself could potentially provide some sort of benefit, maybe a few clues. Perhaps observing televised sports with you could reveal something about your culture as well.”

Conrad realized what a potentially terrible idea this was on its face, inviting not only a stranger but a stranger claiming to be from an entirely different planet to his house for research purposes, not just for his personal sake but even if everything went perfectly, he’d still have to convince Allison of so many things once she got home – but he’d already committed to it and couldn’t back out at this point.

“Okay, follow me.” He elected to backtrack with the alien, leaving the clearing the same way that they’d come in, it’d be faster than finishing the route and as soon as he and the alien. He tried to tamp down the anxiety he’d unlocked in recognizing how many things he’d have to get Allison to go along with, an anxiety rumbling its way into the forefront of his mind that, if allowed to fully fester, might render him catatonic.

“What was it that you said my name meant to you?” The alien mercifully broke the silence. “Viagra is some kind of pill?”

“Yeah, it’s a pill that men take for erectile dysfunction.” Conrad saw confusion on the alien’s face. “That’s uh, like, sexually in men after a certain age, they can’t consistently maintain an...”

“I know what erectile dysfunction is.” interrupted the alien. “We... Well, people suffer from that on my planet, and we have a medicine for it just as well, but it is unfortunate that my name takes such a context here.”

“Is the ED medicine over there named Conrad?”

“No, the leading medicine of that sort is named Stifinski where I’m from. Your first name has no correlation to any proper noun of which I’m aware. I know that a Mannion is a colloquial name given to a skin tag on one’s lower extremities. Does my family name have a correlation as well?”

“Yeah, uh, Yazoo was this two-piece music group from England that had a couple of albums, synthesizer heavy pop music, that sort of thing. They were called ‘Yaz’ over here, though – You mind if I call you that? Yaz?”

The alien appeared hurt by the concept, but he relented. “Viagra was the name of my great grandfather, the first in my family to attend university, the first doctor ever to come from his little hometown of Diver’s Outpost in the district of Talcum... It’s rather meaningful to me, I must say, but if it’s so much of an issue for you, I’ll answer to Yaz.”

Conrad felt a tinge of guilt for asking, but being able to introduce him as something other than “Viagra” would be a huge hurdle to overcome in convincing Allison of the reality of the situation. The sun hit them right as they exited the woods, both Yaz and Conrad put their right hands to their foreheads to protect themselves from the glare. They approached Conrad’s house, a two-bedroom ranch-style rental he’d lived in for around fourteen months, originally alone when he leased it during the prior August. Allison had moved in with him five months prior, shortly after the students had all left town for summer break. He’d moved there initially for the proximity, it was within walking distance of the university’s art museum where he worked as a tour guide, a necessity given his lack of access to a car at that point in time. The one car he had access to, Allison’s green 1997 Hyundai Sonata, wasn’t in the driveway, which meant she was still at the gym, which meant he had some time to figure out a way to explain himself to her.

He unlocked the front door and welcomed Yaz inside. The sound of the living room TV that he'd neglected to turn off before leaving that morning echoed into the entryway. The voices of two or three men cut through a dull roar of crowd noise. Conrad looked to the old analog clock on the wall, the one which used to make bird calls at every hour until the first time he brought Allison home and it'd triggered her ornithophobia, to see it at 10:58 or so. He remembered which channel he'd left the TV on and figured it to be absolutely the perfect time to expose Yaz to a uniquely American cultural phenomenon.

"Hey, check this out," he grabbed Yaz's arm and pulled him into the living room and pointed towards the TV screen, showing the final segment of ESPN's College Gameday. An elderly man sat behind a desk in front of thousands of people in matching green shirts, many holding posters with various slogans, all yelling in individual frenzy, and addressed the camera: "I've picked against Oregon each of the past three weeks, and I've been wrong each of the past three weeks! I'm not making that mistake again, I'm taking the Ducks today!" He proceeded to put a fuzzy mascot duck head upon his own, prompting an eruption of noise and commotion from the crowd behind him.

Conrad turned to Yaz, expecting to see confusion on his face. "Is that something? Does that help you?"

"Wow," responded Yaz, scratching at his head, "I suppose I never thought of what this mission would entail in specific, but this is a bizarre feeling. You have a Rogelio Amaretto of your own, it appears..."

"Who's Rogelio Amaretto?" Conrad responded.

"He is an elderly, retired university football coach who now co-hosts a weekly traveling football preview show every Saturday morning, and he... Well, he does just that, he puts on the head of the mascot of the team he thinks will win the game. It's... I suppose I can't judge too much from only the brief glimpse that I got of it, but it appears to be nearly exactly the same phenomenon that you have here."

"The people of Millencolin have a Lee Corso of their own?"

Yaz appeared dumbfounded and stayed quiet.

"He's got basically the same story, I think. I don't think he was a great coach but he was definitely a coach. He was at Indiana, I think."

"I apologize, I suppose I hadn't recognized how deeply the similarities between our worlds lay until seeing this. My superior officers told me that we were nearly identical, and there are many obvious aspects I could recognize: our languages are the same, it appears like your domiciles here are about the same as ours, I understand all of that, but it's that sort of specific phenomenon which stifles me. Rogelio Amaretto. I suppose I never figured him to be a figure only possible on Millencollin, or at least in the DFD, but I could not have predicted I'd come to see his Earth equivalent today."

The TV had already shifted from the furor of College Gameday's final scenes in Oregon to the muted tones of the 11AM game between Georgia Tech and Duke.

"Is this the same sport that you have, then?" Conrad asked. "Eleven on eleven, men in helmets, oblong ball, 120-yard gridiron?"

Yaz studied a few plays of the opening Georgia Tech drive. "It appears to be the same. I'm assuming that these are teams representing institutions of higher education, judging by the word I assume is short for "Polytechnic" in the one team's name, and the presence of the marching bands in the stadium? The best players at this level go on and play in a professional league that plays its games tomorrow, on the first day of the week?"

“Yeah, that’s precisely it,” responded Conrad. “It plays like this, too?”

“Yes, it appears as much.” He rubbed at his chin and tried to draw some meaning from the Tech quarterback skyng a pass ten yards past his intended receiver. “Though they don’t throw the ball quite so much where I’m from. Most intercollegiate teams tend to use the quarterback as a runner primarily, they’ll run plays in which he decides whether to run himself or give to another player.”

“The triple-option? They still run the triple over there? Allison would love that, she’s a purist about it, that’s what they ran at the Air Force Academy when she was there. I can see if one of their games is on.” He leaned down to pick up the remote from the coffee table they’d picked up off the street during the last student move-out day, and noticed that Allison’s NOKIA 3310 cell phone had been left there that morning, complete with the faded Slayer decal and fourteen or fifteen random phone charms hanging from the lanyard hook.

Yaz watched as Conrad opened the Dish Network channel guide and scrolled through the sports section of channels. “She flies airplanes, then?”

“No, no, just works on them, researches ‘em, designs ‘em, that sort of thing. Well, now she teaches students how to research and design ‘em over at Mizzou. That’s how she ended up here.” Every game that came up seemed worse than the last, Vanderbilt and Mississippi State, Rice and Tulane, Dartmouth and Harvard. Air Force wasn’t scheduled to play San Diego State until the 2PM window. “Well, shit, sorry. I think we’re stuck with mediocre pro-style pass attack football. Do you call it by that name as well? Football?”

Yaz nodded. “Yes, despite the direct contact between the foot and the ball itself being a relatively minor part of the game. It’s a bit odd, I’ll admit. To much of the rest of the world, they call a different sport by that name, one in which the players use...”

“Only the feet and a round ball?” Conrad interrupted.

“Yes, that’s it. We call it by a different name than they do to avoid confusion. We play it in the DFD – I did as a child, as most of us do – and I know it’s played at the collegiate level and there’s an upstart professional league, but it’s not the dominant sport for us the way that it is in other countries.”

“Yeah, that’s... What we’ve got.” Conrad shook his head in astonishment. “There’s an identical Major League Soccer for your people. Jesus Fucking Christ.” He continued studying the Yellow Jacket offense for a few moments before he recognized the potential significance of the words he’d just tagged to the end of his last statement.

“Did you have him over there?”

“I’m sorry?” responded Yaz.

“Jesus Christ, I mean. Did you have a Jesus Christ? A religious prophet of yore like that? The son of god, born of a virgin in Nazareth, the central figure of the dominant religion on your planet?”

“Yes, we have a figure like that. Not by that name, but we have one.”

“Huh,” Conrad replied, as he started to contemplate which historical events and figures had most directly developed the world in which he lived. “Back in the 1940s, was there... or, wait, what year is it to you?”

“It is 2007.”

“Okay, then: In the 1940s, was there a holocaust in Europe, or whatever your equivalent of Europe, in a country led by a charismatic, fascistic dictator?”

Yaz nodded back.

“Was your country’s head of state assassinated in the 1960s?”

He nodded again.

“Did two teenage kids get guns and shoot up their high school about a decade ago? Did two planes crash into two big buildings? Did a big popular professional football player get put on trial for murdering his ex-wife and get exonerated despite most evidence suggesting otherwise?”

Yaz had furrowed his brow, contemplating the analogues to all three statements, before shrugging and nodding.

Conrad contemplated if Yaz was simply confirming these events’ existences to further the overarching ruse. He tried to think of a fake event in attempt to throw him off, only coming up with a half-remembered story he’d heard years prior: “Was there, maybe fifteen years ago, a big energy reactor that was blown up by a terrorist cell, causing it to fall over and crush everyone in the city beneath it?”

“No,” Yaz responded, his face gripped with mild confusion, “but I recognize that story from somewhere.” He scratched at his chin. “A TV game, I think, I played many of them during my secondary school days. Mystic Quest, I believe. It was one of the later entries, maybe the seventh or eighth.”

It hit Conrad where he’d first experienced that story. “Probably the seventh.” This opened a potentially interesting path in Conrad’s mind, one at the very least more interesting than continuing to watch the two Atlantic private schools trade interceptions until Allison got home. He walked to his TV cabinet, a faded wood-grain piece, the last remaining part of a set that he’d taken from his parents’ house when they decided to remodel after he got his first post-college job and they determined they would fully have the house to themselves. He knelt down and opened the cabinet door to reveal his old PlayStation, the one he’d bought used at an EB Games after the original console he’d received for his sixteenth birthday had finally given up after years of needing to turn the console upside down to avoid overheating.

“That didn’t really happen here?” Asked Yaz.

“No, sorry,” he flipped through a plastic tray of CD jewel cases in search of the relevant title, putting aside Demolition Derby, Medal of Honor, and Jumping Flash 2. “I wanted to see if you were just agreeing with me to string me along, sorry. Forgive me, but I’m still a little skeptical about this whole thing.” Finally he found the double-sized case holding all three discs of Final Fantasy VII (black label, original pressing) and offered it to Yaz.

Yaz’s eyes widened and he exhaled sharply as he examined the box, cracked and slightly sun-bleached from years of moving and storage. “My goodness... It’s the same. The hero, Rice, I believe was his name for me but I’m sure it’s different for you, his blond hair cutting against the white background, his oversized sword trapped over his shoulder, down his back, looking away from the viewer at the building off in the distance... This is what I had, I had this exact case, with three Versatile Discs, only mine said ‘Mystic Quest 7.’ I don’t believe it. I lived and died with Mystic Quest 7. I remember locking myself in my room in tears, refusing to come eat dinner with my parents because I was so distraught when Genevieve – the flower girl, I mean – was so brutally killed, but I was a teenager and I didn’t want to show them that emotional side of me, I was trying to maintain my adolescent masculine bravado, you understand.”

Conrad nodded. “God, yeah, so did I, man. Heart-wrenching.” He rubbed the back of his neck and reminisced. “It was well past midnight for me, a Friday night during my senior year of high school. I was in my bedroom at my parents’ house. I was sobbing so hard that it woke my mother up, she knocked on my door and asked if everything was alright. I can’t believe that.”

“This was... I can’t believe this, this was everything to me as a teenager.”

Yaz went silent and examined the text on the back of the case, leaving the only noise in the room the ESPN commentators admonishing Duke for missing a field goal to maintain a 0-0 scoreline at the end of the first quarter.

“You wanna play it?” asked Conrad. “I have the PlayStation hooked up.”

“It’s a singular experience, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, but maybe it’d help you to get a sense of what the differences between our two societies are if you examine something parallel to what you already know. It seems like we’re just dealing with different proper nouns, but maybe if you take a walk with Cloud and Aerith around Midgar rather than Rice and Genevieve around whatever the name of the setting of the game where you’re from, you’ll notice something different. Different music, or art styles, or something like that. I can’t imagine it’s *just* different proper nouns that differ between the two of us.”

Yaz looked at Conrad and shrugged in a sort of pleasant surprise. “That’s not a bad idea, Conrad.” He looked to the TV to see the Georgia Tech quarterback trip and fumble the ball while trying to scramble out of pressure. A Duke defender dove to pick up the ball and accidentally knocked it out of bounds. The play went down in the book as a three-yard gain for the Yellow Jackets. Yaz shrugged his shoulders. “It’ll be better than watching this, I’m sure. This isn’t the pinnacle of this sport, I’m hoping?” He handed the disc case to Conrad.

Conrad laughed back. “Far from it. Far from it.” He knelt down to pull the old PlayStation out of the cabinet and started unspooling a controller, the green translucent Dualshock controller he’d bought with money from his job as a dormitory resident assistant at Mizzou, the icons on each face button had slightly faded with time and use. “If you want to see the pinnacle of college football, you’ll have to wait until tonight when my Tigers play on the road against Oklahoma. Both are undefeated, we’re ranked seventh, they’re number one. It’s on national network TV, the ABC game of the week. They’re always good, they’ve got a prodigious quarterback as always, but I think they’re a bit overrated.” He looked at his watch. “I think your ship will be recharged by then, though.”

Yaz jumped back, startled by the aggressive atmospheric start-up noise of the PlayStation. “Goodness!” he exclaimed. “Mine didn’t do that. That’s odd.” He pulled out a small notebook from his pocket, flipped to an open page, and began scrawling. “I suppose I should begin taking down notes, I might actually get some data from this venture after all, unsure as I am of its relevance to my overall mission.”

Conrad opened the second save file off of his memory card, only about an hour and a half into the game, from a play-through he’d started during the prior summer but had forgotten about. He handed the controller to Yaz.

“That’s bizarre,” said Yaz, flipping the controller over in his hands in examination, “these are the same symbols that my GameCenter paddle had.” He maneuvered the boxy polygonal representation of Cloud Strife around the neon-lit industrial town. “This moves exactly like the game that I know, and it seems to be built the same way. The characters are all little representations upon static backgrounds, the music seems to be similar computerized instrumental tracks, and I remember an area like this...” He walked Cloud past a train station towards a pixelated representation of a stack of boxes. It had looked better on

the old Zenith TV that Conrad had in his childhood bedroom, the one his parents had received as a wedding present in the mid-eighties that was handed down to him as a thirteenth birthday present. The new high-definition plasma-screen Sony television he'd bought with his third paycheck from the museum displayed everything so sharply, but these old games were built with the limitations of an older TV in mind, the modern technology made obvious the limitations of the eras bygone.

"But it's all different. It's been a while, but this music is definitely not what I recognize, these characters are designed differently, and the layout of these settings are different from what I remember, but they feel the same." He shook his head and stopped Cloud in his tracks. "There's a scene that should take place here, between this character and a love interest, right?" He paused for Conrad to nod in confirmation. "There was a similar scene, only atop an abandoned van, that I can remember seeing in my game."

He looked away from the TV and made eye contact with Conrad. "It's a little disconcerting, to be truthful with you. Everything is recognizable, but ever-so-slightly off. It's something like walking around in a dream." He leant down, placed the controller on the table in front of him, and started methodically manipulating his fingers together in what appeared to be something of an anxious tic. "I shouldn't tell you this, but my mission was already compromised to some extent when you saw my craft land, so I'm going to bring imperfect data back home as it is."

"This is something of a controversial mission on which I've embarked. I'm only the twelfth person to undertake it so far."

"How so?" asked Conrad.

"There are a variety of reasons. Primarily, it's built on deceit: I'm supposed to land out of sight of anyone, assume a fake name and briefly befriend someone with some influence and try to gather information that way. This is considered dishonorable to some in my department, but the risk of being straightforward we figured to be outright rejection, like I almost experienced with you today, and potentially the threat of imprisonment or violence considering that we try to work with influential people in order for this reconnaissance. I'm the first participant ever to be as truthful and forthright with an Earthling, and I truthfully didn't intend for it, as I'm not sure that anything I record here will bring me closer to the answer."

"Secondly," he continued, "It's a significant resource-sink with an uncertain return on the investment. The cost of researching and developing our spacecrafts was significant enough, but the cost of fueling and maintaining them only makes it worse. Plus, we don't even really know what we're looking for, and there may not be an answer at all. We may spend millions to send people like myself here only for us to have returned nearly empty-handed so far, and even if we do find the answer of what's held Earth back from developing the same space travel capacity that us Millencolinites have, we have little idea what we'll do with that information. I believe the idea is that, through identifying the gap, we can put further resources into that which we undertook and you didn't, in order to somehow further increase our capabilities, but even that is an unclear outcome, even if we find what we're looking for, and we know neither what exactly we're looking for nor where to find it. The southern part of my country produced an expression, 'like searching for a lugnut in a gravel pile.' Do you have something like that?"

"Yeah," said Conrad. "a needle in a haystack."

"I figured as much – Our mission is not quite that, it's much more difficult: we are searching between two nearly identical haystacks for the empty space where a needle is not. It's a virtual impossibility. We're in the middle of a major economic recession right now in the DFD, and I see more and more on television news these pundits clamoring for our government to reduce or outright cease funding for the Earth Reconnaissance Project as many common workers are losing their jobs and domiciles.

“Perhaps most significantly, though... It’s proven to be something of a psychologically harrowing mission. I mentioned that I am the twelfth person to undertake it, but I am the first to do so in eight months, and we have only been doing it for around two years. Nine people volunteered enthusiastically to undergo the mission in its first six months, and only three in the eighteen months since, myself included. Initially, hundreds of well-experienced and high-ranking shipmen volunteered for it. When I put my name in for it, my friends and I calculated that relatively low-ranking shipmen like ourselves might have a chance by 2015 or 16 at the earliest.

“After the first participants returned home, reports started to come out about the treacherous nature of it all. Seasoned veterans returned home confused and depressed, not only by the difficulty of everything but by how off-putting the experience of walking around a society nearly identical to your own save for superfluous differences in search of some significant difference to explain everything. They expressed sitting in spaces they knew they’d been in before, speaking with people that they swear they’d met before, meeting people they were convinced were the equivalent of their spouses, or their parents, or themselves, even. One veteran, married for ten years with children, swore he’d met his soul mate on Earth and so badly wanted to return here that it drove him mad, he divorced his wife, left his family, and suffered a nervous breakdown in which he tore his clothing off and ranted aimlessly in the parking lot of a carwash before sprinting through it himself. He was knocked unconscious by one of the big scrubbers and likely drowned in the water pooled at the bottom, if not, he was crushed by a mail truck which had pulled in to get washed. He was killed regardless.

“They started telling devoutly religious people to stay away from the mission, as the creation narrative in our major religion is based on a deity creating Millencolin and all of its flora and fauna uniquely in his own image, and some of the first shipmen who came to Earth had major crises of faith. They also started recommending that married shipmen stay away as well after the carwash incident. I, myself, am neither of those, but seeing this...” he pointed to the screen, at Cloud standing at the foot of the pile of wooden crates, “it’s knocking at something deeply within me. I understand how this could drive someone more convinced in their society’s uniqueness into a complete crisis of confidence, seeing formative works in their lives mirrored back to them.

“Personally, though,” He struggled to raise a finger and point at Conrad, his hands suddenly shaking and his voice cracking, “I’m happy to know that someone else had what I did. That I could be so deeply connected in this way with a person 7.5 million light years away from me. I think it’s absolutely wonderful.” He cradled his forehead in his hand in an attempt to conceal the tears slipping from his eyes and tried to suppress sobs.

Conrad found himself frozen in place, watching the man he’d begun to believe was who he said he was, going through an existential breakthrough, unsure whether to sit next to him and console him, as he didn’t feel comfortable enough with Yaz to do so, and wasn’t sure if consolation was even necessary for Yaz’s happy tears. The ground suddenly began to rumble as a low hum, one Conrad recognized as his mechanical garage door opener’s, started emanating from the side of the house. Allison was home.

For a moment, this comforted Conrad, as he’d have to leave the living room to greet her and tell her what was going on, but the subsequent recognition that he now had to explain the situation to Allison shot anxiety and adrenaline from his core down each of his extremities, lighting several metaphorical alarms in his brain. He turned and rushed himself from the living room and through the kitchen to the garage door, hearing her killing the engine of the Sonata, shutting the door, taking each agonizing step up, and finally turning the handle to pull the door open. In the doorway, still in her gym clothes, with a look of surprise on her face at seeing him standing in the corridor connecting the kitchen to the garage door with what he figured was an obviously concerning look on his face, stood all five feet and three inches of Allison Park.

Before he could think, he grabbed a hold of her shoulders and pulled her into the adjacent laundry room, the only exit other than a return into the garage that would keep the living room out of her eyeshot. He found himself pressing her up against their vertically stacked Kohler washer/dryer combo and staring deeply into her eyes.

“H-hi, Conrad,” she stammered out, a sly smile creeping across her face, before leaning up to kiss his cheek. “I didn’t expect you to be this frisky at...” she broke eye contact to check her wristwatch, “1:13 PM, but I’ll take it.” She punctuated herself with a raise of her eyebrows and a lip bite.

Conrad’s brain finally caught on to the situation unfolding in front of him (his lower body had already figured out an independent interpretation and had fully reacted), and he spoke up. “Oh, shit, no, sorry, sweetie, I didn’t mean to do this, or I didn’t mean for you to take it that way...” He released his hands from her and stepped back. “You look lovely, though, but... I just, I have to talk to you about something.”

“Oh,” she said, the hunger in her eyes turning to confusion. She tried to sweep her black hair behind her ears as she normally would when unsure what to do with them, but it was already tied back and she just sort of waved her fingers against the side of her head. “What is it?”

Conrad kicked himself in the moment for never in the past hour trying to come up with even the first sentence of how he’d start to explain the whole situation, leaving himself to shoot from the hip rhetorically during what he figured to be the most pivotal moment of the day. With every passing moment, he saw the confusion on her face turn further towards worry, the echoes of heartfelt conversations about her internal dread of sudden life changes that stemmed from several childhood upheavals caused by her father’s career in the navy only raising the stakes to express himself correctly and fully. He grabbed a hold of her hands, gently as he could this time.

“Here goes...” he whispered to himself under his breath. “First, I want to make clear that this is going to change absolutely nothing. The scope of the situation I’m about to tell you about is, at most, a few hours, okay?” He waited for her to respond in the affirmative, only doing so with a slight nod. “This is not one of those ‘things will never be the same’ deals, but it is a weird thing I’m gonna have to deal with, and it is weird, and I apologize for that, and I apologize for the fact that you’re going to be roped into it, and honestly, if you’d rather not have to deal with it, I will completely understand if you turn around and get in your car and drive off and not come back until later tonight, at which point I promise the situation will have been taken care of. I wouldn’t blame you at all.”

She furrowed her eyebrows in confusion. “What? No, I’m not...” she trailed off and stared down at their clasped hands for a moment before making eye contact with him again. “Slow down. I don’t even know what you’re on about yet, just tell me what you need to tell me and we’ll figure it out.”

“Okay, it’s just... It’s going to sound ridiculous, and the situation *is* ridiculous, and you’re probably going to think I’m fucking with you, or that I’m getting fucked with, but I promise I’m not, I promise you that I’m telling you the truth, I...” His shoulders sunk as he looked down into Allison’s eyes, squeezing her hands with a subconscious force, tighter than usual but not enough to hurt. “I need you to believe me.”

Her eyes widened and her posture relaxed. She looked back down to their hands and kneaded the knuckles of his middle and ring fingers up and down with her thumbs. “This is one of *those* situations, huh?”

He nodded back and chuckled to himself. “I don’t know how I keep getting myself into them.”

“Okay, well, then... I’m going to look you in the eyes as I say this, and I’m going to tell you honestly and fully that I believe you. I believe you’re being truthful in whatever you say next, and I will stick with you through it.” She got up on her toes and kissed his cheek again. “Provided there’s no projectile pizza

vomiting like in the third grade. I admit that I'll take a step back if that happens, but otherwise I promise you that I'm with you, I trust you, everything. Okay?"

Conrad nodded back.

"Good, now, please, for the sake of me getting out of the laundry room sometime before nightfall, tell me what you need to tell me."

Conrad momentarily tried to piece out what only the most important details of the situation were, but eventually decided on telling her the day's story in full. "I was on my normal walking path this morning. I saw, coming out of the sky, right after I get to the first big clearing in the trees on the path, you know, the minute thirteen, well, the minute nineteen or twenty clearing when we go together, clearing, this little aircraft, ship thing come down from the sky. It's unlike anything I've ever seen or heard about, and... damn it, I wish you'd been there, you would've understood *how* it was different, I can only say that it looked different from any of the aeronautic crafts you've ever shown me, it moved in a way that shouldn't be possible with a human-developed craft... Anyway, it lands, and out steps this person, and he tells me that he's from an alien planet off in another galaxy identical to ours, and he's on a mission to compare Earth culture to his own culture in order to understand why it is that his planet developed intergalactic travel and ours hasn't, and basically by the fact that I saw him crash land his ship, he's fucked his mission up, but he's got like" Conrad looked down to his wrist, recognized he wasn't wearing a watch, and consulted Allison's, "Maybe an hour until his ship's battery recharges, so I invited him here to see if maybe hanging out with me can provide him some data for the mission, and honestly I think we've made some sort of progress, maybe only on a personal level, but I think there's been some, honestly!" He felt himself breathing heavily after finishing the sentence.

Her eyes had grown wide and her mouth had dropped in either astonishment or confusion, Conrad hoped it was the first as having to repeat himself would only further cement how absurd the situation was to him. "And he's here?" She asked.

"Y-yeah, he's in the living room right now."

She bent her neck back, looked towards the ceiling, and sighed. "Which is why you pushed me into the laundry room, you didn't want me to see a stranger in the living room and freak out. I see, I understand. May I ask you one thing about this?"

"Sure."

"Okay, with the caveat added that I believe you fully and truthfully have told me everything that you saw and heard and were told today with this person... Are you certain that he's not fucking with you?"

Conrad wanted to respond fullheartedly in the negative but couldn't honestly get himself to do so, a trepidation he acted out with his mouth half-open and a slow shake of his head, punctuated with a shrug. "You should've seen his ship, the way that it moved and everything, and he's been so specific about everything, he was crying in the living room before you got here about everything he's learned from it. If he's fucking with me, he both has access to impossible technology and is one of the greatest improvisational minds the world has ever seen."

Allison made the same head-shaking mouth-slightly-agape motion, punctuated with a similar shrug, a series of confused body language tics originally unique to both (the mouth thing hers, the head shaking his, the shrug from both) that had amalgamated into one shared confused expression over the course of months. "Fuck it, whatever. Can I meet him?"

He pulled her by the hand out of the laundry room, through the kitchen, and into the living room, where they saw Yaz, seated on the black IKEA ottoman that Allison had salvaged from her college dorm room, with his eyes widened and his mouth agape staring at the television, the Dualshock held very loosely in his hands. His chest heaved with every breath, he appeared entranced by the action on the screen. The plastic tub in which Conrad kept his PlayStation discs had been taken out of the cabinet, and a loose stack of the discarded cases of *Duke Nukem: Total Meltdown*, *Gex: Enter the Gecko*, *Madden 99*, and *Broken Sword* sat on the coffee table next to one newly open and empty case for *Tony Hawk's Pro Skater 2*. A polygonal avatar of Tony Hawk skated idly in circles around a virtual amalgamation of Philadelphia's Love Park on the screen in front of him, bumping into obstacles and falling into fountains with no steering assistance from Yaz.

"Yaz?" asked Conrad.

Yaz's posture became rigid as Conrad's voice snapped him from his trance. He turned to face Conrad and Allison, revealing glassy red eyes and unswept tear stains on his cheeks. "I- I'm quite sorry, I don't know what's come over me. Firstly, I hope you don't mind that I looked through your other software in search of other corollaries to my own from youth, but I found this skateboarding one that I feel like I recognize, and this song... it's latched onto me somewhere deeply within me, I don't understand why or how, but it's moved me in a way that I've not felt in quite some time."

Conrad listened into the sound from the TV for a moment. Mixed under the noise of Hawk's wheels rolling over pavement was the chorus of a song he'd heard so often in high school that it'd fallen into ambient background noise.

*But I don't care where I belong no more /
What we share or not I will ignore /
And I won't waste my time fitting in /
'Cause I don't think conscience is a sin*

Conrad figured out what was going on, paused to try to complicate the implications of what was going on, then stopped himself from internally following that rabbit hole, realizing he could contemplate it for hours on end. "Yeah, that's, uh, that's Millencolin. That's the band that shares a name with your planet."

Yaz's eyes grew about as wide as Conrad had seen them get in their short time together as he contemplated the implications of the situation, seemingly stopping himself from following that rabbit hole to the bottom in the same way that Conrad had. "That is... incredible. It's as if this song, not necessarily the lyrics but the sound, spoke to something held deeply within me, reflecting my soul back to me sonically." He wiped a tear off the ridge of his cheek with two forefingers and shook his head to himself.

"Huh." Responded Conrad. "I think that's a song about getting bullied in high school, or whatever the equivalent of high school is to them where they're from, I think they're Dutch?"

"Swedish," Allison corrected, tapping her elbow at Conrad's ribs. She raised an open palm in a half-circle wave to Yaz and introduced herself. "Hi, I'm Allison."

"My goodness," Yaz tried to recollect himself as best as he could, the song now having finished and transitioned into Naughty By Nature's 'Pin the Tail on the Donkey'. "I've absolutely forgotten my manners. It's a pleasure to meet you, miss, Conrad has told me much about you, of your love of airplanes and the triple-option." He juttied his tear-dampened hand out for her to shake. "My name is Viagra Yazoo."

She reciprocated the handshake and found herself repeating his name. "Viagra Yazoo?"

"I've been told it's a peculiar name here. Your partner took it as evidence that I was trying to deceive him when I first introduced myself to him, and I apologize for that unfortunate coincidence. For what it's worth, where I'm from, Allison Park was the name of the secondary school to which two teenage kids brought guns and massacred their classmates about a decade ago."

"My, that is an unfortunate coincidence. A downright tasteless one to come up with if Conrad mentioned to you where I was in the mid-nineties for my freshman year of high school." She raised an eyebrow and turned to Conrad for clarification, who shook his head. "I see why he avoided proper nouns when he explained everything to me in the laundry room. Conrad tells me you're doing some research here?"

"I am, yes." He looked down at the controller in his hands, then back to Allison. "In a way, I suppose. I recognize that it looks like I'm just playing TV games, but I feel like I've found something of import on a human level through simply spending time here with Conrad today, certainly more than I figured initially. Through these, I've actually found a shared cultural touchstone between not just your world and mine, but Conrad and myself, and getting up-close details of how specifically different a corollarial work of art is between us two I find to be quite valuable. It's small, certainly, it doesn't *answer* the question, but it might help us find where we could go and what we could do in order to get ourselves closer to finding the answer... But you know how that goes, Conrad tells me you're a researcher yourself."

"Oh, dear god, yes I do." She smiled, shook her head, and rolled her eyes. "I guess we've got that in common." She put her hand up on Conrad's shoulder and gestured towards their bedroom. "I need to change clothes, so I'm gonna go in there and do that, and Conrad is going to come with me because I would like to speak privately with him as well, okay?" She pointed a finger between both of them and waited for some show of affirmation. Conrad followed her into their bedroom.

As soon as the door shut behind her, she positioned herself in front of him so that they stood chest-to-chest. She took a light grip of the plackets of his teal Nautica button-down he'd bought at a Salvation Army well before she'd met him and tended to wear as something between a shirt and a jacket. "Okay, sweetheart, I'll be frank: This is weird. I'm going to go along with it, but it is weird. I'm not 100% certain that he's not pulling our leg or something, but I'm making the conscious decision to trust your judgment to be accurate, as you have more substantial evidence than I do, and I don't know what anyone could get out of doing what he's done for as long as you say he's been doing it. As it stands, if this was fake, like if it was a modified weather balloon or something and he's landed in front of you, made up this ridiculous story and fake name, it seems like he's only done it, at this point, to play decade-old PlayStation games with you. Either that or maybe scope out how to rob our house, but, again, if he could afford some – by your testimony, which I am trusting to be accurate – inhumanly advanced aircraft to pull this stunt, what could he get out of robbing us out of the amenities afforded us by our combined fifty-five thousand dollar per year salaries? We're either dealing with a profoundly wealthy, profoundly, talented, profoundly dedicated, and profoundly... mentally sick person here, or you've been playing PlayStation with a guy from an alternate Earth here on a reconnaissance mission, and..." She pulled herself up to his level and pressed her lips up against his.

"Fuck it, whatever. I'll go along with it." She spun him around towards the door. "Now, get back out there, we've been talking for an unnaturally long time as it is, I'll change, I'll be out in a minute or two, and we can figure out what to do next from there, maybe we can take him to Harpo's for the game." She pushed him out towards the door, giving him a light spank in the process.

He stumbled back into the living room. Yaz had returned to putting his full intention towards the game, having just narrowly landed a transfer between two ramps on Venice Beach with Hawk, punctuated with a celebratory record-scratch sound effect. For all intents and purposes, to Conrad's eyes, Yaz's research appeared to have devolved into just playing the game.

As the adrenaline, heart activity, and rerouted bloodflow brought forth by his body due to the preceding close contact in the bedroom subsided, hunger pangs made themselves obvious in Conrad's abdomen. He walked to the kitchen to rifle through the pantry for a snack. As he searched through the multicolored boxes of processed foods, it hit him that Yaz might not have eaten since leaving on the mission. He leaned around the pantry door and spoke in Yaz's direction. "Are you hungry at all?"

Yaz broke from his concentrated state. "Conrad, sir, I would never have asked, but if you are offering, I must say that I have not eaten since I finished my fourth meal pod upon passing the threshold into your solar system roughly nine hours past. I am rather famished."

"Well, yeah, man, then come sample some Earth food! We've got Nutter Butters, Nature Valley biscuits, Ritz crackers..." He pulled a blue plastic carton out and set it on the counter behind him. "I think I'll treat myself to some Oreos." Yaz's eyes widened and he softly gasped to himself as he approached the counter.

"Of course you have Diplows of your own, here!"

"Is that what you call them there?" Conrad handed him a stack of three.

"Yes! You're intended to *dip* them *low* into a glass of milk and enjoy them that way."

Conrad shrugged. "That makes more sense than 'Oreo', I suppose." The two crunched away at their cookies. Yaz ate them straight-on, Conrad pulled off the top cookies, ate them individually, and followed with the remaining cream and cookie off of the bottom.

Yaz looked at the carton and crooked an eyebrow up. "What does this phrase signify?" He pointed to a pink ribbon on the label. "Double Stuft?"

"Oh, it means there's twice as much of the cream put between the cookies here than they do with the normal Oreos. Do they not do that where you're from?"

Yaz stopped and examined the half-eaten cookie between his fingers. "You mean to tell me that this is an abnormality? This amount of cream between the cookies is more than typical?"

"I wouldn't call it an abnormality. It's like a specialty variant of the snack, I'd probably say. Like there's the original Oreos which are stuffed half as much, then there's the Golden Oreos, the Chocolate Oreos with the chocolate cream, the Halloween Oreos with the orange cream, that sort of thing."

"But they didn't start this size? They became Double Stuft at some point, and you can still purchase the half-as-stuft version today, you're saying?"

"Yeah, I think it was like the mid-seventies when they brought in the Double Stuft Oreos. I looked that up on Wikipedia once."

"Jaime Fucking Moreno..." he flipped the carton back and forth in his hands. "That can't be *it*, surely, but... That must be something. Maybe it is it..." He stared straight through Conrad's eyes. "Apologies, that's 'Jesus Fucking Christ' to us. There's never been a Diplow any thinner than this. Diplows began at this thickness, default to this thickness. We have no Double Stuft Diplows, they'd be Quadruple Stuft here." He was breathing deeply again, his eyes again glassy and his grip on the package so tight that the plastic on the package shook.

"I... I apologize, Conrad, and I thank you for your aid and companionship and trust today, but I might've found it. I might've found it." Package in hand, he turned down the entryway and rushed out, throwing open the front door and neglecting to close it behind him. Conrad walked behind him and watched him

tuck the Oreo carton under his arm like a running back and sprinted off back towards the walking trail on which they'd met.

He felt a soft hand lay on his shoulder. "Oh, he's, like, gone? He just ran off?"

Conrad shook his head. "I... guess that was it to him? That they started 'em Double Stuft and we had to develop Double Stuffing techniques, that's what did it?"

"Huh." Allison said. "I might e-mail my old professors from the academy about that. Maybe we'll move some of that funding around towards cookie development." She led him back over to the couch and sat him down next to her. "I guess, uh, all things considered, we either advanced the field of science on a planet millions of light years away or we were subject to the most elaborate scheme to procure half of a pack of Oreos in human history."

Conrad sighed, continuing to shake his head. "Regardless, it's 2:05 PM, we're out of Oreos, and we met a weird guy today. I'll say I grew to like him."

She consulted her watch, lunged forward for the remote, and turned to the Satellite box input, flipping deep into the sports channels for Air Force/San Diego State, flopping back down and smiling at the return to familiarity. "You wanna skip the store and get something delivered tonight?"

Conrad flopped a hand down on her knee. "I saw Pizza Hut brought the stuffed crust back."