

Interstellar Playground Game

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“No more,” Jack’s mother said, plucking the handheld game console from his grasp. “You’ve been playing that thing since you got home from school yesterday.”

“Mom!”

“Nope,” his mother replied, sliding it into the back pocket of her jeans. “Go outside. Help your father in the garage, kick a ball around...*something*, anything, just get some sun and fresh air for goodness sake!”

Jack was all set to “pitch a fit” as his grandmother liked to say, but a quick look at his mom persuaded him not to. Her hair was tied back with her flower-print bandana, which meant she was in deep-cleaning mode. It was either go outside or be forced into chores.

Jack chose the backyard.

His soccer ball was a few feet from the sliding glass doors that led to the neat little rectangle of grass behind his house. He booted the black-and-white towards the rear fence, then lazily followed it across the lawn. The anthill that his dad had promised to get rid of a few weekends back had grown even larger, and Jack spent several minutes watching the dark little bodies carrying food in and little grains of dirt out. He finished with them just in time to see the spaceship fall out of the sky.

It tumbled straight from the blue towards Jack’s backyard, starting out as a mere speck and turning into a car-sized vehicle within the span of a few seconds. The boy flinched and then froze up, expecting it to crash right into the grass in front of him. But ten feet from the ground it righted itself and stopped its rapid descent, hovering silently above the green.

It looked as if it somebody had poured molten, gunmetal-gray plastic over the skeleton of a flying saucer. It also looked like the time that Jack’s family did homemade pretzels, but by the time they were done cooking all the dough had expanded into one big, pretzely blob. The only distinguishing feature was a yellow-white dome stuck to the bottom of the vehicle that slowly pulsated with an otherworldly glow.

Without warning, an alien beast flickered into being right beneath the ship.

The thing was about the same height as Jack, but that was the only characteristic they had in common. Fine brown hair covered the visitor’s entire body, which was shaped like a slug and supported by a dozen pairs of small, horselike legs growing out of its sides. Two bright-blue horns curved inward atop the mound of fur and eyeballs that made up its head-region, and above the thick, black and silver collar around its “neck”, the monster’s hair receded to display a softball-sized patch of pink and purple skin.

Jack barely had time to take in the features of the visitor before it advanced on him. His feet were stuck to the ground and his eyes were frozen open...so he saw the strange appendage unfold from its seamless home on the beast's side and rocket towards his chest. Reflexes running in parallel with his freezing fear braced his muscles for impact...but when the alien arm struck him, it felt like being brushed with a feather duster. Satisfied, the monster stepped back beneath its spaceship with all the grace of a punchdrunk giraffe.

A strange ribbon slid out from the side of the thing's collar. There was no color to the material; it wasn't black and it wasn't transparent, but wherever it was, it just...edited out the rest of Jack's vision wherever. It had the same color as the smell of a whistle - it was a thing that just *wasn't*, and yet Jack could still read the words that formed as it twisted and turned through the air.

TAG. YOU'RE IT.

The creature burred and whistled, and a second later the ribbon snapped back into its collar, leaving an afterimage of the playground taunt that slowly faded away. The brown fur-slug flickered out of sight, and a second later the gray mass of a ship tumbled back into the sky and disappeared.

Jack, jaw agape, stood for several moments with his eyes locked onto the blue above him. Then he closed his mouth and walked around the side of the house to the garage.

"Hey Dad?"

"Yeah?" His dad had the leafblower disassembled on a tarp and was poring over its pieces.

"Can you help me build a spaceship?"

His dad picked up a gear and inspected it closely. "Um...Do you mean the model rocket that your aunt gave you last Christmas? The one you never opened? Sure, we can put that together this afternoon."

Jack turned to look at the sky once more. He had been called out, and he fully intended to respond in kind.

"Well," he said. "I guess it's a start."