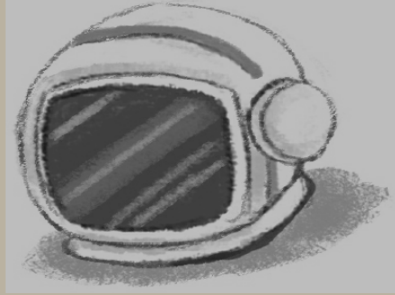




WEEK 2 DAY 5

**Read Chapters 12 and 13 –In
Chinayouidiot and Thrill Ride of
the Century**

IN CHINAYOUIDIOT



'We have reached our destination,' said Dr Drax. 'Welcome to Infinity Park. It's too dark now to see it properly and you'll be too tired to appreciate it.'

A thing like a minibus with caterpillar tracks came to take us to our accommodation. I remember looking out of the window but there was nothing to see – just the odd campfire and every now and then a car.

We'd been driving for about ten minutes when the minibus thing stopped suddenly and Dr Drax asked us to look out of the windows on the left side of the bus. At first there was nothing but darkness, but then suddenly something like a massive door had opened. There was a building. It looked like a big red cliff lit by banks and banks of spotlights. It was bigger than the biggest skyscraper you've ever seen, and had massive Chinese letters painted down the side.

'What is it?' said, well, everyone really.

'That,' said Dr Drax, 'is the Possibility Building.'

'But what's inside?'

'Inside there is our main attraction. Inside there is the Rocket.'

'But what is the Rocket? What kind of ride is it? What's it like?'

'What's it like? It's not like anything. It's unique. It is the biggest thrill ride in the history of the world, that's all. I can't describe it because it's indescribable.'

When I was being a grown-up in Liverpool, I got free yoghurt. In China I got My Own House! The minibus thing dropped us off at a little cluster of bungalows with lawns and street lights and traffic islands, like a housing estate.

A whole bungalow all to ourselves. I said to Florida, 'Isn't this brilliant?'

'Basically you've kidnapped me and taken me to a desert, a desert in China.'

'I suppose. But come on – apart from the fact that it's in China – what d'you think? I mean, look at this house!'

'There's nothing *apart from* about being in China, Liam. Being in China is major.'

The house was mostly one big open room – with a kitcheny bit at one end and two huge couches at the other and a weird kind of little garden full of cacti in between.

'And,' said Florida, looking all around it, 'it's got no telly.'

'Well, maybe we could ask for a telly. Anyway, it's probably good that we haven't got one because we're supposed to get up early in the . . .'

Florida had found a little panel of buttons in the arm of the couch. When she touched one, the whole living room wall turned blue and started to hum, and then a picture appeared with sound. The television was an entire wall of the living room.

'Now this,' said Florida, 'is good.'

We both flopped on to the couch. We were hypnotized. It was amazing even when it was only showing farming news in Cantonese, but after a bit of channel flicking we found an American channel that was showing *Celebrity Seance* (where living celebrities try to contact the spirits of dead celebrities) and Florida looked like she'd gone to heaven.

'Look!' she yelled. 'There's Lindsey. Aaaah!' Lindsey was the presenter, but Florida acted like Lindsey was like her mum, her sister, her cat and her favourite blanket all rolled into one.

I said, 'As soon as this is finished, lights out and bed. Big day tomorrow.'

'Liam, stop talking like a grown-up. There's no grown-up here – that's the only good thing about it.'

'But I'm supposed to be your dad. That's the whole point. I've got to act the role of your dad. So I'm getting into character, like Lisa said.'

'If you're going to be a dad, be like my dad, not like yours. Get me presents, and ice cream; don't sit there telling me about history and stuff.'

'D'you know what time it is? Isn't it a bit late for ice cream?'

'It would be if you were a real dad. But you're not. You're a kid. I'm a kid. We can do what we want. If we want ice cream for supper, we can have ice cream for supper.'

And apparently we did want ice cream for supper. Luckily there were *buckets* of ice cream, including Chocapocalypse flavour, in the freezer.

Florida took it back to the couch and sat there in front of the telly. Every few seconds, she'd poke her spoon in. '. . . And if we want to watch the telly all night,' she said, 'we can.'

'Yeah but—'

'Not "Yeah, but." Just "Yeah."'

While she was busy with the ice cream, I sneaked another look at *Talk to Your Teen* and found a bit about how to lay down ground rules and make sure your teen has barriers. I was just going to set a few barriers in place when Florida yelled, 'Liam! Come and look at this!'

She'd discovered that you could send pictures from her Draxphone to the big screen. She made me video her doing an acceptance speech and then project it on to the wall.

'I want to thank my mum and especially my dad. I hope you're proud of your little princess now,' she said. 'And I hope together we can end global warming and poverty and stuff.'

It looked wobbly but convincing on the big screen. I said, 'What exactly are you accepting?'

'An award.'

'For what?'

'For being famous.'

I went to get a drink out of the fridge and found some little bottles of water shaped like rockets, with fins and a pointy bit at the top. They were perfect weapons for a water fight. I stuffed three in each pocket, tiptoed back to the living room and squirted Florida. She shrieked and ran after me. I threw her a bottle just to make it fair and we had this excellent water fight

all over the house. I hid behind the couch, hoping to ambush her. I must've fallen asleep there, because the next thing I knew, the phone was ringing.

'This is your alarm call,' it said. 'Please join your party in the car park of the Possibility Building at 8 a.m.'

I picked my way through the discarded ice-cream buckets and over the soaking wet floors and eventually found Florida curled up asleep in the cupboard with the cleaning stuff. I woke her up (she wasn't happy) and went to get changed.

I emptied my bag on to my bed so that I could sort everything out. There were some Warcraft notes, and an unexpected envelope, which turned out to contain a photograph of me, Mum and Dad on my First Communion day – Mum must have sneaked it in there. Dad's broken St Christopher statue was at the bottom of the bag too. He must've sneaked that in too. He'd obviously been worried about me going to the Lake District on my own. I've brought it with me into space. It's standing on top of the multifunctional display, just like it used to stand on the dashboard of his taxi. If my dad could see it now, he'd be *really* worried.

THRILL RIDE OF THE CENTURY



This part of space seems to be a communications dead zone. I can't get any signal on my phone. Maybe we're on the wrong side of the satellites. I'm going through old messages in my inbox for company. I've still got the last one Dr Drax sent: 'Tk care of u-self & children. C u in 10 hrs.' That was about twenty-four hours ago. Not only have I not seen Dr Drax, I haven't seen her planet.

I've also still got the first one. It says: 'Welcum 2 Infinity Park. B @ Poss Blding car park @ 8. Courtesy car in drive. Use phone to open car. Drv safely.'

Courtesy car!

'What's a courtesy car?' said Florida.

'Well, it's a car that they lend you and you can use it as much as you like.'

'You mean a car for you to drive? Oh no, no, no, no, no, no, no! Not after last time,' said Florida. Then she said, 'What kind of car is it? Is it another limo?'

'Let's go and see.'

It was a little greeny Toyota-y thing. It looked like a big toy really. I put my hand out to touch it.

'Liam . . .' said Florida. 'We can't.'

'No, we can't. You're right. Except . . .'

'Except what?'

'Except I am supposed to be a taxi driver.'

'Oh.'

'So I've got to pretend I can drive.'

'Liam, you can only pretend you can drive in a pretend car. In a real car, you have a real accident and get us really killed.'

'It doesn't look that dangerous. I mean, it looks a lot less dangerous than the Porsche did. The text said you open it with your phone.'

I pointed the phone at it and the headlights blinked and all the doors popped open. Then a robot-y voice from the dashboard said, 'Climb aboard, Liam Digby.' You have to admit this was interesting. You can't really blame us for getting inside the car. It would've been rude not to.

As soon as we were in the seats, the car spoke again. 'Hi, Liam, hi, Florida,' it said. 'This drive should take fifteen minutes. Don't forget to fasten your seatbelts.' And, without us doing anything, the engine started up. A nice, gentle little engine. It sounded so reassuring. It sounded like it *trusted* us. We fastened our seatbelts.

Florida was looking around the inside of the car. 'There's something missing,' she said. 'It's got hardly any levers or buttons.'

'It's an automatic. My dad drove one once when he was covering for someone else. He said it was like driving a dodgem car.'

Florida said, 'Dodgems are easy to drive.'

It was hard to disagree with this. I've driven loads of dodgems. Not one of them stretched my abilities. And this car seemed so helpful.

While I was trying to come to a decision I touched one of the buttons on the dashboard. Florida yelped, 'Don't! It could be the ejector seat or something!'

The windscreen wipers started banging over and back across the windscreen. We both laughed. At least we knew what one of the levers was for. And the one with the picture of the headlight on was probably the headlights, so the one with the numbers on must be the one to make it go. I pushed it down one notch very gently and the noise in the engine changed

to an angry roar. And the satnav said, 'That's my accelerator. Don't forget my handbrake.'

It wasn't even me. It was Florida who found the handbrake and slipped it. The car rolled forward, purring. Suddenly there was a different noise – a big honking noise, and some squealing and lights flashing. Another car was driving up behind us when we pulled out. Other cars! I'd forgotten about other cars. This one swerved out past us and honked us again. Another one squealed and honked just behind us.

'This is brilliant!' whooped Florida inexplicably.

The hardest part about driving a car is keeping it in the right place on the road. You mustn't go too near the kerb (your tyres make a weird screaming noise) or too far over to the middle (drivers coming the other way look frightened and angry).

At first I tried to stay pretty much in the middle. When I looked in my rear-view mirror there was a line of cars behind me doing exactly the same, so it must've been right. There was nothing at all ahead of us.

'Kings of the road!' yelled Florida.

We did everything the satnav told us and soon, instead of driving past neat lawns and white bungalows, we were bumping along a narrow cinder track through a field full of tents and huts. Little kids kept running up to the car, banging on the window and smiling at us. There were donkeys and ponies tied up at the side of the road. A camel even walked in front of us. I said, 'This can't be right.'

But the satnav said, 'Yes, this is right. Stop worrying.' Now that's what I call an impressive level of interactivity.

Then we saw it. Beyond the tents and over to the left, the Possibility Building. It really was big. And red. Like a huge unopened present. I was trying to imagine what was inside, which is probably why the car drifted slightly off the side of the track, which is probably what led to the sirens and flashing lights going off all over the place and Florida shouting, 'Stop! Stop!' I did stop. I stopped surprisingly completely. When we looked up there were two policemen coming towards us with guns.

'Well, game over,' said Florida. 'They are going to ask to see your licence. They'll find out you're not a grown-up and they'll send us home.'

Her theory was much more optimistic than mine. My theory was that they were going to shoot us.

The police in fact bowed to us, got on their radios, talked in Chinese for a while, then bowed again and one of them said, 'Honoured guests?' in English.

'Yes,' said Florida, 'honoured guests. That's us.'

Then he did this mime which I think meant, Follow-us-in-your-car-even-though-you-blatantly-can't-drive. And they led us all the way to the Possibility Building car park. This was the best thing ever according to Florida, because it was a police escort and even Madonna doesn't get a police escort.

'That's because Madonna doesn't have a dad like yours,' I said.

Dr Drax was waiting for us with the other kids and dads. She asked if we were ready to see the biggest thrill ride in the world ever.

I said, 'Yes!' slightly too loud and too excited to be truly dadly.

'Then let's go,' said Dr Drax.

The Possibility Building is so big that sometimes there are proper rain clouds floating around inside it. A room with its own weather. I can tell you all that now. But I didn't notice any of this at the time. I didn't notice it because I was too busy looking at Infinity Park's main attraction, the World's Biggest Thrill Ride, the ride I'd been waiting to see all this time: the Rocket. In front of me. And above me. Way, way, way above me. Because the Rocket goes all the way, past the interior clouds, to the roof.

And the reason this ride is called the Rocket is that it is a rocket.

A real rocket.

A blue rocket.

A massive rocket.

Of the going-to-space kind.

It was so massive that at first we couldn't tell it *was* a rocket. It looked like a wall of metal pipes and panels. We couldn't take it in. We all looked up and then looked down, as though we were a bunch of scanners trying to upload an image. Samson Two seemed to have the fastest processor. 'It's a rocket,' he said.

'Yes.' Dr Drax smiled. 'It's my rocket.'

How good is that sentence? 'It's my rocket,' like 'It's my lunch box,' or something.

'Of course we have been making rockets here in China since Feng Jishen invented gunpowder in the year 970. At first they were used to fire arrows. They had names like Swarm of Bees or Five Leaping Tigers. But my rocket has a different purpose. It's called the Infinite Possibility. And . . .' she said, turning to the kids, 'I'm giving it to you. I'd like you children to think of it as a present. From my generation to yours. I'm not going to ride in it. But you are.'

'When you say ride in it,' said Samson One, 'do you mean, ride in it . . . to space?'

'Yes. The biggest thrill ride of all time is a ride to space. I'm sorry to have been so secretive about this. It was only because . . . it's a secret. And we want to keep it that way. Any questions?'

Monsieur Martinet said, 'You want to send our children to space?'

'For just a few hours. The rocket will pop up to space, do a simple little job and then pop down again.' She made it sound like an elevator. 'As thrill rides go, it's the ultimate.'

Everyone agreed.

Dr Drax went on, 'Most thrill rides have a height requirement. This one will need a bit more – you'll have to pass some medicals and you'll need to train.'

'We're going to be astronauts,' said Samson Two.

'In fact, here in China the word is "taikonaut". Yes, you are all going to be taikonauts, with parental permission, of course.'

All the kids looked round at their dads for permission. I even looked round for mine. Then I remembered that mine wasn't there. I was the dad this time.

Dr Drax turned to the children again and said, 'I called the rocket a present, but it's more a kind of apology. You see, I believe my generation has all but destroyed this pretty blue planet. I hope I'm wrong, but if I'm not then the only hope for humankind might be for us to start again somewhere else. Just because we've destroyed the Earth, that doesn't mean it's the end of the world. There are millions and millions of stars in the universe. There are

probably even millions of planets like this one. Every bit as good as this one. It's just a matter of finding one.

'If we're going to do that, we are going to have to make some long journeys, journeys that might take years. And if a journey is going to take years, you'd better have a young crew. So that they'll still be strong and useful when they arrive. And that is what Infinity Park is all about. I want it to be a place that will inspire young people like you to want to work in space. In fact, if they come to the park, some of them will be able to go to space, just for a little while. This is the prototype. You will be the first. The first children in space.' Then she said, 'Any questions?'

Florida's hand shot up. 'Does that mean we're going to be famous?' she said.

'Maybe. But not yet. As I said, this mission is a secret – our little secret.'

'How famous?'

'Well . . . world famous, I suppose. Maybe. As long as everything goes to plan.'

Florida was bouncing on the balls of her feet with sheer happiness. She put her hand up again.

'Florida?'

'I love this colour,' said Florida, pointing at the rocket. 'What do you call it?'

'I call it blue,' said Dr Drax. 'I think most people do.'

'But there's blue and blue. This is a lovely shade.'

'Perhaps we could call it Rocket Blue. Next question?'

The next question was from Samson Two. 'Could we call it Ballistic Blue? Ballistics is the science of rockets, and Ballistic Blue has a nice alliterative quality.'

'Very nice,' smiled Dr Drax. 'Next question?'

Hasan said, 'That's a lot of paint. Did the supplier offer you a good discount for placing such a large order?'

'Does anyone have any questions that are not about the paintwork?' said Dr Drax.

No one did. 'In that case, one of our engineers will now show the children around the rocket while we grown-ups get down to the paperwork. Rather

a lot of forms to fill in for this trip, I'm afraid. Surprisingly difficult to get insured for a flight into space. Even though this one is extremely safe. Completely safe. Almost.'

You could see that Dr Drax was disappointed, that she thought the children had sort of missed the point, going on about the paint like that. But that's what kids do when big things come up. We focus on the little things. Like the kids sleeping in this rocket now. They're not dreaming about Planet Earth. They're dreaming about their own little bedrooms.

I had a different reaction to the rocket. I wasn't interested in the paint. I had one thought. One big, damp thought. Namely:

I AM NOT GOING TO SPACE.

The children are having the thrill ride of the century. And we – the grown-ups – are going to sit around and watch and maybe video them or something.

'Come along, children,' smiled Dr Drax as the kids all climbed on to the escalator platform at the side of the rocket.

I said, 'But we can see round the rocket too, can't we?'

'I'm afraid not,' Dr Drax smiled. 'I want the children to get used to being together without their daddies. After all, they won't have their daddies in space.'

That's right.

Because . . .

I am not going to space.

Florida Kirby IS going to space.

That is exactly the wrong way round. It's supposed to be MORE fun being a grown-up. That's why I swapped being a kid for being a dad. What's the POINT in forfeiting your childhood if all you get for it is filling in forms?

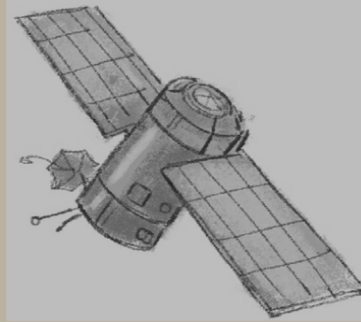
- What is the thrill ride of the century?
- Why does Dr. Drax want the children to go to space?
- How long did she say they would be gone for?
- What do the grown ups have to do?
- Do you trust Dr. Draz? Give an explanation for your answer.

Read Chapter 14 – I am the space Daddy

What difficulties has Liam faced in pretending to be a Dad so far?
List as many as you can.



I AM THE SPACE DADDY



When I realized I'd gone all the way to the Gobi Desert just to watch Florida Kirby going to space I felt like I'd died. Not died as in real life. But died as in a game – when you're running along nicely on Level Forty, having all sorts of Level Forty-type adventures, and *bleep*, you're dead with no spare lives, and you have to go right back to the beginning, and go through all the boring bits all over again.

While Florida and the other kids were looking around a real rocket, we dads had to sit down and fill in forms. Forms full of questions about our children. I can't believe how much parents are supposed to know about their kids. Like their date of birth, for instance. In fact I was all right with that one because I still had Florida's passport so I just copied her birthday out of that.

'Oh dear,' said Dr Drax. 'Here's a daddy who doesn't know his own daughter's birthday.'

'I know Samson Two's birthday,' said Samson One, 'and one day the world will know it too. It will be a national holiday in our country.'

'I do sometimes forget Max's,' said Monsieur Martinet, 'but he is too well brought up to say so.'

The birthday question turned out to be the easy one. There were questions about vaccinations, allergies and what childhood illnesses she'd had. I did

remember that she'd been off school a lot in Year Six, but I couldn't remember why.

All the other dads were ticking things off and filling things in. I tried to see what Max's dad was writing so I could copy, but he caught me looking and put his hand over his forms so I couldn't see. Childhood illnesses. I couldn't think of one childhood illness. Except that when Florida was talking about celebrities earlier she'd mentioned chronic something. I thought if I wrote 'chronic' it would help me remember the other word. That was it – chronic obesity.

Dr Drax was looking over my shoulder. She said, 'Chronic obesity? Are you sure?'

Then luckily I remembered that obesity means fat. I said, 'Not chronic obesity, sorry.' I crossed out obesity and put arthritis. It looked quite convincing written down.

Dr Drax sniffed quite hard, then took the form off me and looked at it. 'I see under vaccinations, you've ticked yellow fever and malaria.'

I'd ticked quite a few to be on the safe side.

'Oh, and dengue fever. Has Florida travelled a lot?'

'Yes, I think so.'

'Think so?'

'I mean, I think she has because she has. She's been to Florida. Hence the name. And . . . we all went to Enchantment Land in Southport in Year Six. I mean, when *she* was in Year Six.'

'Southport in England?'

'Yes.'

'Only you don't normally need vaccinations if you're travelling within England.'

'Not normally, no,' I said. 'But I say . . . why take the risk? You can't be too careful – that's the Digby family motto.'

After the paperwork, it got worse. We played golf.

Golf! The other dads couldn't have been more excited if you'd given them invisibility cloaks.

Golf while Florida was looking around a rocket.

Golf while she was getting ready to be a taikonaut.

Golf.

Golf. If you think Monopoly is boring, you should try golf. If you were playing golf inside World of Warcraft, what skills would you need? Running skills? No. Sword skills? No. Cunning? No. Wisdom? You are joking. The object of the 'game' is to put a ball in a hole. Tidying-up skills, that's what you'd need. Tidying-up skills and a lot of time on your hands. A game? I suppose it feels like a game if you are actually one of the undead.

We pootled around this golf course in two electric buggies while they all talked about their averages and handicaps, and told stories about times when they'd put other little balls in different little holes.

'I taught Samson Two to play golf some years ago,' said Samson One as we lined up to take our first shots. 'Such a practical way to learn about the interaction of physical forces and so on. For instance, if I use a driver to tee off . . .' A driver is one of those golf sticks for hitting the ball with – apparently they've got different names, like wedge and iron and stuff. Anyway, Samson One teed off with a driver and explained about how the parabola of the ball in flight was related to the swing of the driver as he hit the ball – I wasn't really listening. I just hit the ball as hard as I could. It flew down the grass. I shouted, 'Yes!!!!'

The others just stared at me and Monsieur Martinet said, 'Why are you so happy?'

'I hit it loads further than him. I'm winning.'

Samson One laughed. 'But you've hit it too far. It's gone past the hole and into the rough.'

I had sort of assumed that the point of the game was to hit the ball as far as you could. I hadn't known about the holes.

'Extraordinary,' said Monsieur Martinet, 'that one could reach adulthood without knowing how golf is played.'

I said, 'Yeah, but do you know how World of Warcraft is played? I bet you don't.'

Monsieur Martinet sort of squinted, then said, 'Golf is a game that teaches many of the qualities needed for success – for instance, decision-making and attention to detail. Computer games, on the contrary, are for idiots.'

'Or teenagers,' said Eddie Xanadu.

I realized I'd said the wrong thing. I tried to recover a bit of ground by saying, 'Let's see if you do better then.' I'm not sure how dadly that sounded, to be honest.

The others all got their ball on to the flat bit of grass round the hole. I had to get mine out of the long grass. Dr Drax came with me and told me I should chip the ball with a niblick. I was quite excited by that suggestion. I thought a niblick might be some slim pond-dwelling goblin, which is what it sounds like. Disappointingly, it's just another golf stick.

It does work though. It knocked the ball straight up into the air and it plopped down on the green bit. 'Well done,' said Dr Drax. 'There's no feeling on Earth as satisfying as dropping the ball down just so like that.'

'Maybe not on Earth. I bet there are some much better feelings in space though.'

'Yes,' she said. 'You've certainly given your daughter a great opportunity.'

Yes, I've given Florida a great opportunity. And I've given myself a niblick.

The other dads were all lined up ready to tee off again. Samson One drove his ball down the fairway in another lovely parabola. I kept hold of my niblick.

'Oh, you can't tee off with a niblick,' smiled Dr Drax.

'I'm not teeing off.' I chipped the ball into the back of the golf buggy.

'Now look what you've done,' snarled Monsieur Martinet.

'I've done,' I said, 'a stroke of genius. When you drive up on to the green in the buggy, my ball will go to the green in the back of the buggy. And I'll just chip it out again.'

'You can't do that! You can't send your ball round the golf course in a car.'

'Why not?'

'The rules. Golf has rules. Lots of rules. That's the beauty of the game.'

Samson One said, 'Logic says he can. If we think of the golf buggy as a hazard? Well then, balls do go into hazards. Sand traps and ponds and so on.'

When you say 'hazard' to normal people they think of ice on the road, or fog, or sudden invasions of Night Elves. Golfers think you mean sand. Or a puddle with a duck in it.

'Hazards,' said Monsieur Martinet, 'do not get up and take the balls right up to the hole, do they?'

'No. But you can't interfere with a hazard. And if this hazard happens to be heading to the green, then the ball will have to go with it.'

You could tell that Monsieur Martinet was unhappy about this by the way he started waving his five iron round his head and yelling about how childish I was.

'I'm childish?! I'm not the one getting all stressed out about a game.' Honestly, grown-ups talk about teenagers spending too much time online and taking games too seriously. A game of golf seems to take about three years, and they talk about it like the next stroke is going to save the world.

'Yes, childish. What kind of father are you? No wonder your daughter is so complicated when you have so little regard for rules!'

I looked at him. He really thought he was a Level Forty monster and I was some sort of Level Seven baby warrior who'd run away if he snarled at me. But I had my mental elixir. I let it fill my brain and then I Engaged. 'You think you're a good dad? What kind of parent lets his child go off into space while he plays golf?'

Monsieur Martinet looked a bit confused when I said that. And so did the other dads. Until Dr Drax said, 'Aren't you doing exactly that, Mr Digby?'

Well, yes, I was but I knew that my dad would never do that. Let alone my mum. I said, 'In my school – my child's school – when they go on a trip, a responsible parent goes with them. Even if it's only to the museum or the art gallery. In the New Strand Shopping Centre, you're not even allowed to go into the newsagent without an accompanying adult. Why aren't you doing that here?'

'You mean you'd like to go to space with the children?' asked Dr Drax.

'Yes. Yes, of course I would!'

'But . . .'

They were all staring at me. Monsieur Martinet rolled his eyes and muttered, 'Of course he should be with the children. He IS a child. Tall, but a child.'

Dr Drax held her hands up. 'I think,' she said, 'I am having one my of great ideas.'

We waited to see what it was.

'A daddy in space. I will send one of you to space. But which one?'

I said, 'Me. I'll go.'

'Don't be ridiculous,' snarled Monsieur Martinet. 'The job needs a real leader. I'll go.'

'It might be better to have someone capable of understanding the science,' said Samson One. 'Someone like me.'

'Let's have a little competition,' said Dr Drax. 'I can see from the way you play golf that you're all very competitive. And you are all so different. Monsieur Martinet imposes a strong discipline, Samson One believes in education . . .'

'I certainly do.'

'Mr Xanadu is very indulgent – or generous. And Mr Digby is . . .'

She looked at me as though she was trying to remember why she specially selected me. In the end she said, 'Mr Digby is available.'

'When you say competition . . .?' said Mr Xanadu.

'Simple. You'll all do the space training with your children, and the one who proves to be the best taikonaut . . . no, not the best taikonaut, the best father – he will go to space.'

Yes! I'd really levelled up this time. It was like when you get to the next stage of a game and the whole landscape changes – and it's full of new dangers and different thrills. I'd levelled up from a round of golf to space exploration.

'I will be the winner,' said Monsieur Martinet. 'When it comes to winning, I wrote the manual.'

'Me,' said Samson One. 'I have the brains.'

'Me,' said Mr Xanadu. 'Because I want to and I do tend to get what I want.'

'That,' said Dr Drax, 'is for the children to decide. We'll let them vote.'

I didn't say anything. I knew it was going to be me.

I was dying to hear all about the rocket. The minute Florida came through the door I said, 'So what was it like? The rocket?'

She said, "S'all right.'

'That's it? Your first day on a real rocket and that's all you can say? "S'all right"?''

'No.'

'What else?'

'I'm starving.'

I remembered the bit in *Talk to Your Teen* about using fiddly food to get teenagers to talk. I made a stirfry and said, 'Let's use real chopsticks.'

'I don't know how to use chopsticks.'

'There's instructions on the packet.'

'They're in Chinese.'

'Just try.'

It made the meal last a long time, but it didn't improve the conversation because we were concentrating so hard on the chopsticks. In the end I just said, 'Well, it doesn't matter if you don't tell me what the rocket's like anyway. Because I'm going on it too,' and I told her all about the competition.

Finally Florida began to communicate. She said, 'Hahahahahahahahahahahahaha.'

'What's so funny?'

'Your joke. You are joking, aren't you? You don't really think you're going to win.'

'I might.'

'Liam, have you got a bike?'

'I've got a Cherokee Chief.'

'Is it a fast bike?'

'It's got twenty-three gears.'

'Could it win the Grand National?'

'No.'

'Why not?'

'Because it's not a horse.'

'And you won't win the dad competition because you're NOT A DAD.'

'True. On the other hand, I'm not an actual elf warrior either, but the Wonderlust Warriors rule the floor in World of Warcraft.'

'Liam, I have no idea what you're talking about.'

'I'm saying . . . pretending sometimes works. Like at Little Stars.'

'OK . . .'

'So help me pretend to be your dad. All you have to do is call me Dad.'

'OK. I'll call you Dad . . .'

'Thanks.'

'. . . provided you call me your little princess.'

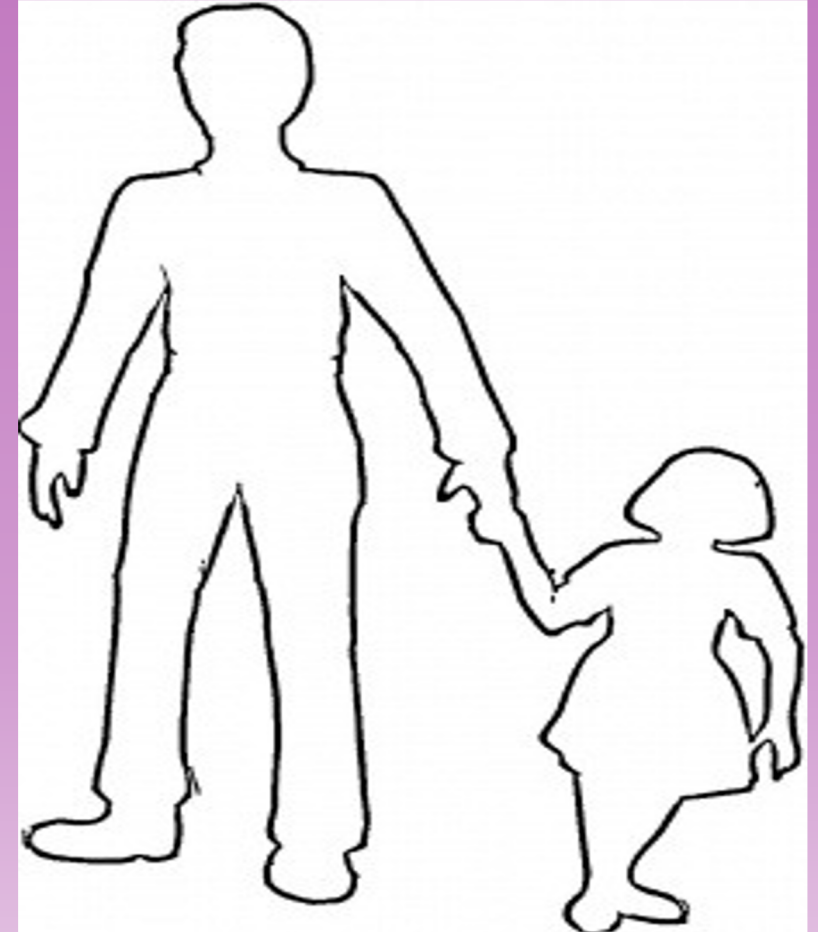
'My little WHAT?!'

'It's what my real dad calls me. I miss being called Princess. Please.'

'I'll try.'

Main Task – Around the outside of each character, write how Liam and Florida appear/seem to the other characters.

List key words and phrases to describe how each character is acting and feeling.
Add quotes from the text to support your ideas.



Plenary

We know that Liam ends up on the space ship.
Predict – Why do you think he got picked?

