

Frank Cottrell Boyce

# Cosmic

WEEK 4 DAY 3

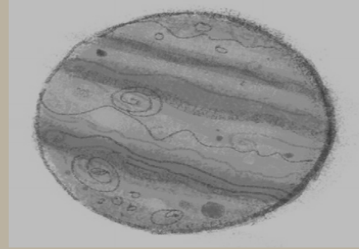
it's one giant

leap for all

boy-kind

# READ CHAPTER 17 – THE VOMIT COMET

## THE VOMIT COMET



When the alarm woke me the next morning, it still felt like there was someone trying to drill into the top of my head. Florida explained that it was a hangover. You get them from drinking too much alcohol. She said the best cure was a big fried breakfast. 'But we're not supposed to eat this morning. We're going on one of the rides.'

'My thrill-ride days are over.'

'Liam, you've got a hangover. It's no big deal, not if you're a grown-up. Grown-ups get them all the time. Just drink some coffee and when you see the others, make a joke about it.'

'OK. And Florida . . . thanks.'

Even though it wasn't finished – there were still diggers and workmen everywhere – you could see Infinity Park was definitely going to be the World's Greatest Thrill Park. There were gardens and lakes and lots of half-built rides in the shape of rockets. The entrance was a huge arch in the shape of two rockets crossing each other. Outside the gates was just endless beige desert and mountains. Inside, everything was bright colours and trees and waterfalls.

As we drove around in the little caterpillar minibus thing, Dr Drax acted as our tour guide. 'In Infinity Park,' she said, 'some of the rides are not ordinary fairground rides. They can be demanding and dangerous – that's why you

have to train to go on them. And that's why you have to do exactly as you are told at all times. Sorry. The insurers make us say that. Any questions?'

Hasan put his hand up. 'Can we have a proper breakfast now?' he said.

'No. Any more questions?'

'What about a packet of crisps?'

'No. Nothing.'

'Why?'

'Come and see.'

She took us to a kind of meadow with rockets instead of trees, like a rocket orchard. At the far end was a plane.

'Looks like an ordinary plane,' said Dr Drax. 'Not too different from the kind of plane that takes you on holiday. Except it doesn't have any windows. And it's not taking you on holiday. It's taking you on a parabola. Quite a few parabolas, as it happens. Does anyone know why?'

Samson Two's hand shot up. 'Zero gravity.'

'Oh, Samson Two, aren't you clever?'

'In fact,' said his dad, 'he's officially a genius—'

'Today,' Dr Drax went on, ignoring him, 'you are all going to have a little taste of how it feels to be weightless. Excited?'

We were.

'Any more questions?'

'Can we have just one packet of crisps between us?' said Hasan.

'Hasan,' Dr Drax said, 'this plane is officially called the Draxcom Zero Star. But the people who've been testing it have been calling it something a bit more informative – the Vomit Comet.'

'Oh.'

'Because most people who ride on it throw up.'

'Ah.'

'So no crisps.'

'No.'

The outside of the Vomit Comet might look like an ordinary plane, but the inside certainly doesn't. There's only one seat – a long bench thing with lap

belts. The walls are completely covered with giant white cushions. There's nothing else in there but a big empty space. 'You could think of it,' said Dr Drax, 'as a kind of giant soft-play area flying through the air. There. That's a nice, cuddly thought, isn't it? Sick bags are under the seats. Good luck.'

While we were strapping ourselves in, Florida whispered, 'What does she mean, weightless? We're going to lose weight?'

'Sort of . . .' I started trying to explain about gravity but then the engines started up. And we were taking off. I don't mean like a normal take-off. The Comet seemed to be heading straight up into the air for ages. We had to hold on to the bench so we wouldn't slip off. And the ringing in our ears was so loud we thought we'd never hear anything else again. I felt like my head was going to explode. It was not enjoyable. Everyone was trying not to think about what was going to happen, which wasn't easy because Samson Two was trying to impress Florida by describing the whole thing – how we were going to climb to some amazing height and then dive faster than we would fall if we were shot down.

Max wailed, 'Dad, tell him to stop talking!'

Monsieur Martinet looked at him sternly and said, 'Max, there is no point trying to hide from fear. Fear will find you. You have to look fear in the eye, say hello and keep walking by. Remember, Fear is the Enemy of Courage.'

'Yes,' shouted Samson Two, 'you must understand that you feel more fear than normal partly because of the unusual amount of gravity acting on your pituitary gland. It's being squeezed and is therefore pumping out more adrenalin than usual. You should just enjoy it.'

Max stuttered. 'But . . .'

'Max,' snapped his dad, 'I insist that you ENJOY IT!'

'LET ME OFF!' wailed Hasan.

'You know,' said Eddie Xanadu, 'NASA does rides like this in America. Only they cost two thousand pounds each time. Don't think of it as a scary experience. Think of it as a bargain.'

Florida was gripping my arm. But I didn't feel too bad. The higher we climbed, and the more my ears hurt, the more I thought I'd had this feeling

before. Then I remembered where. I turned to Florida and said, 'The log flume.'

'What?'

'It's just a big log flume. You remember, how it takes you ages to chug up to the top of the ride and then you roll over the top and . . .'

'Oh yeah,' said Florida. And she relaxed her grip a bit.

'It's a twenty-thousand-foot log flume. The only difference is, you won't get wet at the end.'

She grinned at me. Thinking of it as a log flume made it feel different. Suddenly the feeling in our ears wasn't just horrible air pressure – it was excitement filling our heads like a balloon. A voice on the tannoy said, 'We are now approaching the crest of the curve. Please unfasten your safety belts ready for a zero-*g* interlude.'

'This is it!' said Florida and she let go of me completely, put her arms in the air and screamed, just like on the log flume. Unlike Monsieur Martinet, who grabbed my other arm even tighter.

'I remind you,' said the tannoy voice, 'that your sick bags are under your seats.'

Monsieur Martinet still didn't let go. He hadn't undone his seat belt and he didn't go for his sick bag. He was just sitting there, breathing deeply with his eyes shut, gripping my arm. I tried to prise his fingers off me.

Then it happened.

I stood up, pulling myself out of Monsieur Martinet's grip, and tried to walk. The first step was longer than I expected. The second was a lot longer and on the third I just took off.

For a whole second I was flying head first down the plane like Superman. But my feet kept going upwards so I ended up doing the first double somersault I'd ever done in my whole life. I said, 'Whoo hoo!' or something. And when I came up I was facing Florida. She jabbed me and shouted, 'Tig!' and the jab sent me spinning back the other way. When I came up this time, I was facing Samson Two. Before I even thought about it I tiggered him. He looked completely surprised and confused. Like no one had ever tiggered him before. I tried to swim off – that's what it felt like, swimming in the air – but suddenly it was all over. One of my feet touched the floor and before I knew

it everyone was standing on the floor again. Except Monsieur Martinet who was still strapped into his seat.

Florida was whingeing. 'Why's it called the Vomit Comet? No one was sick.' She sounded like she thought I should do something about it.

Then that voice came on the tannoy again and said, 'That was the first parabola. Please prepare for the second.'

'There's more!' said Monsieur Martinet, and grabbed my hand again.

So it all happened again. The plane climbed, our ears hurt, Hasan said he wanted to get off and then we all started floating again.

Someone thumped me on the back and sent me somersaulting down the plane. When my head came up, I could see Samson Two grinning at me and shouting, 'Tig to you too!' He put his thumb up.

Suddenly a voice yelled, 'Stop!' and there was Monsieur Martinet, still in his lap belt, but a bit floaty, like a balloon on a string. 'The pilot has lost control!' he bawled. 'This is an emergency! We need help! We need . . .' but instead of words a ball of puke slipped out of his mouth and drifted off down the plane like a tiny green planet.

'Look!' yelled Florida, pointing at it as if it was the most exciting thing in the world ever. She got herself in front of it, opened her sick bag and let the vomit planet drift inside. 'Back. Of. The. Net!' she yelled.

When we were all back on the floor again, Florida showed me the sick bag and said proudly, 'Caught it.'

'I know.'

'Want to see?'

'Not really.'

She also tried to show it to Dr Drax when she landed. I did try to discourage this. 'Florida,' I said, 'I'm sure Dr Drax doesn't want to see that.'

'Oh, but I do, I do.' Dr Drax smiled. 'I was watching on the monitors and I have to say, Florida, the coordination and agility you showed when you caught Monsieur Martinet's little accident was very impressive. I think you have the makings of an excellent taikonaut.'

Florida glowed a kind of radioactive pink and looked round to make sure that everyone was listening. No one was. Everyone was staring at the plane. A little girl with her hair tied back with a ribbon and her hands held stiffly at her sides was trotting down the steps of the plane and on to the tarmac. We were all thinking the same things – how did she get on there? Where was she when we were all floating around? She looked about Florida's age, but the way she stood next to Dr Drax reminded me of Mrs Sass standing on the stage at assembly – still and straight, waiting for us all to be quiet.

'Ah,' said Dr Drax, 'I'd like you all to meet my daughter – Shenjian. She was piloting your plane today.'

Eddie Xanadu said, 'Surely you're teasing again.'

'Not at all. This,' said Dr Drax, 'is what Infinity Park is all about. Giving children the chance to show what they can do. Although Shenjian is only thirteen—'

'Thirteen?!' shrieked Monsieur Martinet.

'... she is an excellent pilot.'

Everyone gasped.

Shenjian said, 'Infinity Park believes in young people. This is why I started training as a jet pilot when I was nine years old. Astronauts of the future must be young so that mankind will be able to make longer journeys. I am the future.'

You could see that Dr Drax was enjoying how amazed we all were. She said, 'Any questions?'

Florida said, 'That's a lovely boiler suit. I like the detail on the pockets. Will we be getting ones like that?'

'Possibly.'

'They look very astronauty. I'd love one.'

'Any questions that are NOT about clothing?' snapped Dr Drax.

'This is very inspiring,' said Samson One. 'Samson Two can do things that many adults cannot do. And when he was only thirteen Alexander the Great was already a great leader. Although of course, even Alexander the Great was not flying jets. Because they hadn't been invented.'

After that the grown-ups had to go and see a doctor for finger pricks and blood pressure.

'Mr Digby,' the doctor said when it was my turn, 'you have the metabolism of a twelve-year-old. You'll have to tell us your secret.' And she winked at me!

Monsieur Martinet was next in line. He said, 'I believe he has the brain of a twelve-year-old too. When the pilot lost control of the plane, this man tried to start a game of tig!'

'The pilot lost control of the plane?' said the doctor. 'I heard that it all went very smoothly.'

'They have to say that,' said Monsieur Martinet, 'for insurance purposes.'

Florida was waiting for me when I came out of the doctor's room, which is unusual because she usually just gravitates towards the nearest television. She was still radioactive pink and worryingly smiley. She said, 'How did that happen?'

'What?'

'How did we just start floating around like that?'

She was being so nice. My game skills told me to suspect a trap but I couldn't help enjoying her treating me with respect like this. I started to explain about the Earth having gravity which keeps you on the ground and how if you go far away from Earth you have less gravity so you float.

'Yeah, but what IS the gravity? I mean, how does it work?'

'Well, all objects exert gravity. And big objects – like planets – they have enough gravity to pull things towards them. Like the Earth attracts the Moon and the Moon attracts the sea.'

'What are you talking about, the Moon attracts the sea?'

I tried to explain tides and stuff to her, but the more I tried to explain how it worked, the more I realized I didn't really know.

'Liam,' she said, 'you don't really know, do you?'

'No.'

'We'll go on Wikipedia tonight and find out.'

'You do know that *Celebrity Dental Check* is on telly tonight?'

'We can skip that. It's the one with Tom Cruise, where they find out that his teeth are completely false. Like you couldn't already tell.'

I was sure I was going to get all the votes. After all, I was the only grown-up who actually liked being weightless. I got one vote. In fact, everyone got one vote again. I said to Florida, 'What is the point of the voting? Who is ever going to vote against their own dad? Except when someone pays them not to, in ice cream.'

'I voted against you,' said Florida.

'What?! Again? Why? You said you were going to help me.'

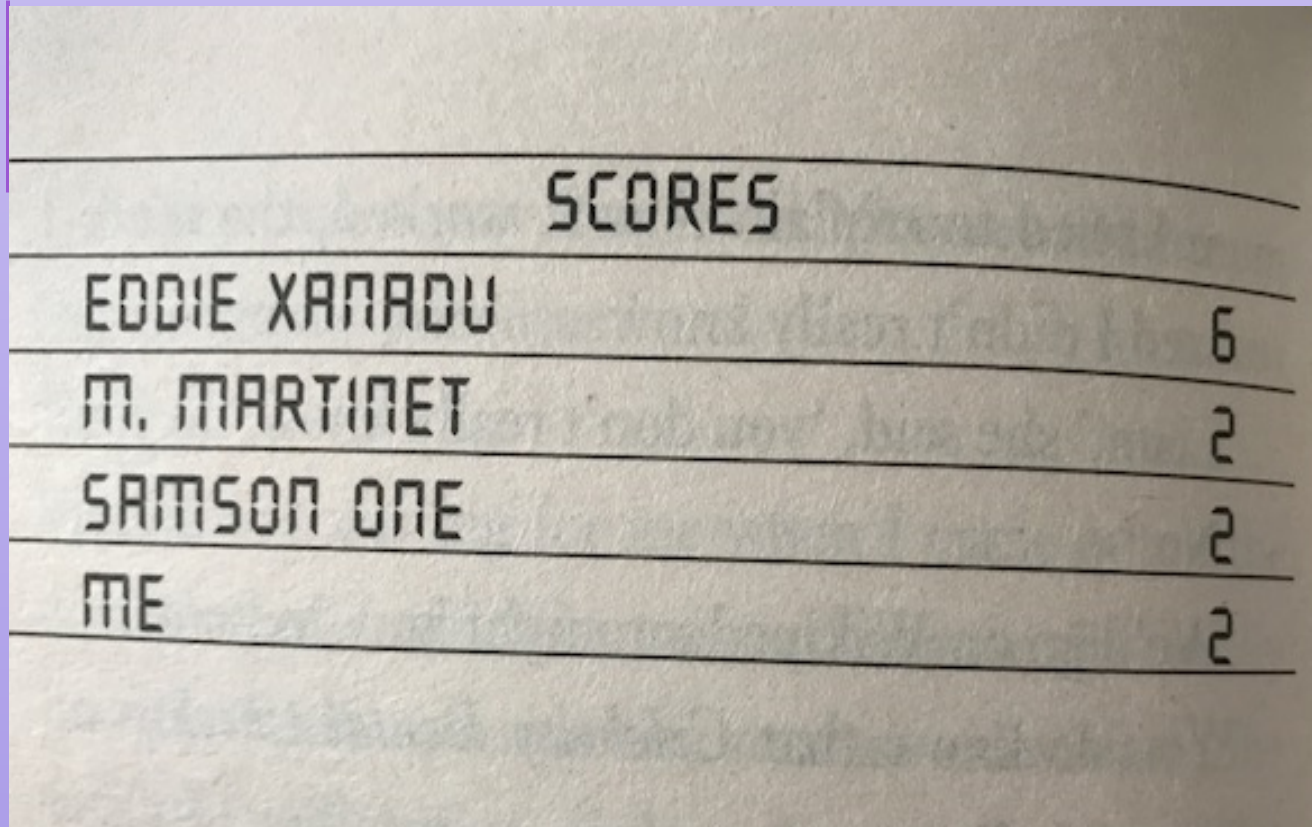
'I voted for Monsieur Martinet.'

'You . . . what? Why? He was scared! He passed out on the runway! He THREW UP.'

'I know. Wasn't that great?'

SCORES	
EDDIE XANADU	6
M. MARTINET	2
SAMSON ONE	2
ME	2

Now that you have read the chapter look at this image:



SCORES	
EDDIE XANADU	6
M. MARTINET	2
SAMSON ONE	2
ME	2

Somebody has voted for Liam again. Who could it be and why?

The choices are:

Florida, Hassan, Max, Samson 2 or... someone else?

**MAIN TASK: YOU NEED TO EXPLAIN WHO HAS BEEN VOTING FOR LIAM. USE YOUR KNOWLEDGE OF THE CHARACTERS AND STORY SO FAR TO COME TO YOUR CONCLUSION. (WRITTEN ANSWER IN BOOKS)**