

WEEK 3 DAY 1

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# STARTER



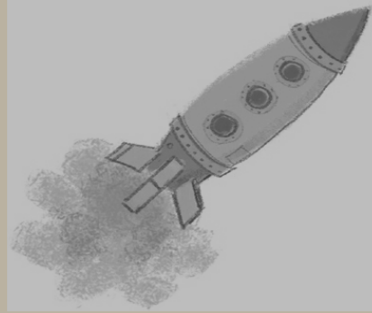
Who said this quotation and who do you think he is?

What do you think 'the sky is the limit' means when people say it?

What do you think Buzz Aldrin's message is?

**READ CHAPTER 15 —  
THE ICE-CREAM MAN  
OF THE GOBI DESERT**

## THE ICE-CREAM MAN OF THE GOBI DESERT



My first day of taikonaut training, we had to be at the launch site before dawn. I was really excited. Florida was really sleepy. It was so dark we couldn't tell who else was there. There was just a bunch of yawning, stretching shadows. Even the Possibility Building didn't look that solid, until the Sun rolled up and peeled a strip of shadow off its back, as though it was a huge red banana. And then it tore up all the other shadows like tissue paper and there was everyone unwrapped on the tarmac, like surprises.

Hasan and his father were sitting in a golf buggy. 'I enjoy riding in it so much,' said Eddie, 'I decide to buy one for my dear Hasan.' Hasan was at the controls. He kept driving it round in little circles to amuse himself. 'Enough,' said Eddie. 'You make my head spin.'

Monsieur Martinet was wearing a T-shirt that said 'Vote Martinet'. I think Samson One saw me looking at it, because he smiled at me and then rolled his eyes. I've seen other dads do this to my dad sometimes when we're out shopping with Mum. It's like a secret dad sign or something. For a second I felt truly dadly so I rolled my eyes right back at him.

Then Dr Drax arrived. 'Sorry to drag you all out so early,' she said. 'Today is your first day as trainee taikonauts, and we're going to begin with a nice, gentle exercise in team building, problem solving and decision making. Very easy. Follow me, please.'

Eddie offered her a lift in the back of his new golf buggy. She said, 'How kind,' and they all trundled off round the far side of the building. The rest of us tried to keep up on foot.

When we caught up with them, Dr Drax was pointing out into the desert. 'Look,' she said. 'The shadow of the Possibility.' The building's shadow stretched out into the desert, long and straight like a road made of ink. 'A road that is pointing to something. Something I'd like you all to go and find and bring back for me.'

'What kind of thing?' asked Samson Two.

'Oh, nothing much. A flag. Just an ordinary little flag. It should be easy enough to spot. There's nothing else out there. All you have to do is follow the shadow.'

Everyone stared out into the desert. There really wasn't anything out there. Except geology. Miles and miles and miles of wind erosion and salt deposits.

'Hasan would like to use his new golf buggy, if you don't mind,' said Eddie.

Dr Drax laughed and explained that this wouldn't be possible. 'It's not a race. I want you all to stick together. And work as a team. I've got you a little present to help you along . . .' I thought she was going to cough up at least a jeep, and maybe some weaponry. But no. She handed Please-Call-Me-Monsieur Martinet something that looked like a massive firework. 'This,' she said, 'is a distress flare. If you set it off we will see it, no matter how far away you are. And we'll come and get you right away. We don't want you to come to any harm.'

'Thank you,' said Monsieur Martinet. 'I will use it wisely.'

'Of course, if you do set this off, that will mean you have failed in your mission. And I'll have to find myself a brand-new crew. So if you use the flare, you lose the rocket. All righty?'

I just could not wait to walk off into the desert. The others weren't so keen. Samson One wanted to go and get protective clothing, water, sunblock, hats.

**'And what if it takes longer than a day?' said Eddie. 'Maybe we should get tents. And tinned food. And plates. Because when you eat on the beach, sand gets into your food. It must be even worse in the desert.'**

**'This is turning into a shopping trip!' said Florida. 'I love it!'**

**I said, 'Can't we just go NOW?!' and realized straight away that this lacked dadliness so I said, 'I have actually organized desert expeditions before so I know a bit about it. And in my experience, the sooner you set off the better.'**

**Everyone stared at me. 'You've organized a desert expedition before?' said Monsieur Martinet. 'I thought you were a taxi driver before.'**

**'This was before before, before I was a taxi driver.'**

**'You never told me that before, Daddy' said Florida with a big phoney smile. 'A desert expedition? Honest?'**

**'Yeah. So . . . let's go.'**

**'I really think we ought to prepare,' said Samson One.**

**'In fact,' said Samson Two, 'Mr Digby may have a point. The only clue we have about the location of the flag is that it lies somewhere on the line of the building's shadow. At the moment – just after dawn – the shadow is at its longest. As the day goes on, the shadow will get shorter. We'll have less shade. And less information.'**

**'That,' I said, 'is completely what I was saying. Let's go!'**

**Inside the shadow it was surprisingly cool. Florida padded along next to me, going on about how she'd been promised a thrill ride. 'This is not a ride,' she said. 'This is a punishment.'**

**'Florida, it's Friday morning, you're supposed to be in double maths. Instead you're walking in the Gobi Desert.'**

**'Which you've done before, apparently.'**

**'I didn't say I'd walked in this desert. I said I'd led an expedition across a desert. And I have.'**

**'What desert was it then? The Bootle Desert?'**

**'It was the Blasted Lands of Azeroth, actually. And it was a lot worse than this. It had giant insects for one thing. And a portal to the evil netherlands.'**

**'Liam, what are you talking about?'**

'Don't call me Liam, and I'm talking about World of Warcraft.'

'Well, don't talk about it any more. Dads don't. And why, by the way, are we walking in the shadow? We could be getting a tan.' As she said it she stepped out of the shadow and into the sun. From where I was standing it looked like she'd vanished completely. Then she bounced back into the shade really quickly.

'Ow, ow, do you even KNOW how hot it is out there? We're going to be cooked.'

'That's why we've got to try and do this before we lose the shade.'

'And why is it so SANDY?!' She seemed to think the Gobi Desert was my fault.

'Because the area in which we are standing was once the seabed of a great ocean that was exposed to the wind by a fall in the water level. The rocks and the mountains that were on the seabed have been broken down into sand by the wind over the last thousand million years.'

'Liam, I don't CARE!!!'

She shouted so loud that you could hear her words moving away from us over the dunes. Then we heard something that sounded like God hoovering the world. It was the wind. A wind that threw sand at our legs and arms so hard it felt like we were being stabbed with a billion nano-knives. Sand went into your mouth and up your nostrils and, worst of all, in your eyes. We all got into a kind of scrum, with our backs to the desert and our heads in a circle. Monsieur Martinet's face was right in my face. He snarled, 'Well, Mr Digby, you've done this before. What do you suggest we do now?'

I said, 'Wait for the wind to die down?'

'You'll be waiting a long time,' said Florida. 'It's been blowing for a thousand million years so far, apparently.'

I hadn't thought of that. I felt weirdly impressed with her. I said, 'That's an amazing thought, Florida.'

'Oh,' said Florida. 'Thanks, Liam.'

I pinched her and she said, 'Dad, I mean. Not Liam.' Then she put her sunglasses on and said, 'Oh, that's much better.' No one else put theirs on, but everyone stared at her. 'Has no one else brought their sunglasses?'

'It was dark,' said Samson Two. 'It seemed unnecessary.'

'I just thought they looked cool,' explained Florida. 'David Beckham wears sunglasses in the dark.'

'Dad,' said Hasan, 'she's got sunglasses. I want them.'

'Of course,' said Eddie. 'Little girl, how much for the sunglasses?'

'I'm not selling them.'

'Mr Digby, how much for your daughter's sunglasses? We would like to buy them.'

'They're not mine. They're hers.'

'But she's your daughter. You tell her to sell them.'

'I won't,' I said, 'but I do have a plan. My daughter was the only one sensible enough to bring sunglasses, right? So this is what we do. She wears her glasses. The rest of us cover our faces with our T-shirt or whatever and hold hands in a line, and she goes at the front and leads us to the flag.'

They were all quiet for a moment and then Samson One said, 'That's actually a good plan.'

'I used it last time I was in the desert,' I said. Which was true. I used it to get a bunch of Night Elves out of the Labyrinth of Light.

Monsieur Martinet said it was a good idea too, but he wanted Max to be the one with the glasses, 'Because Max is a natural leader.'

'Maybe so,' said Florida, 'but the thing is, they're my glasses. Let's go.'

So we set off in this conga line across the desert, while Monsieur Martinet shouted encouraging words about other people who had crossed deserts. 'Mark Antony,' he said, 'and Lawrence of Arabia – they were humans. We are humans. Humans can do this.'

It takes concentration to keep walking forward over soft sand when you're blindfolded so nobody spoke for a while, but there was a moment when everyone stopped and thought the same thing. It was the moment when we stepped out of the shadow. You didn't need to wonder what had happened. It was like someone had pointed a flame-thrower at us. I remembered that Lawrence of Arabia and Mark Antony had walked across deserts with great big armies, not with a couple of kids and their dads. And also that, by the time they finished, their armies were a lot smaller.

And then the wind dropped. And at last we could open our eyes and see where we were. And that was bad news too.

We were standing at the bottom of a massive sand dune. A hundred-foot hill of slippery sand. You could see the wind stripping streamers of sand from the top of it. When Hasan saw the dune he started crying. 'Do we have to go up there? I can't go up there. It's too high.'

Monsieur Martinet seemed to see this as a challenge. But not for him. For Max. 'Max,' he barked, 'run up the dune and see if you can see the flag.'

Max looked shocked. 'Why me?'

'Max,' yelled Monsieur Martinet, 'winners lead from the front.'

'But—' said Max.

'DO AS I SAY! THIS IS A QUESTION OF DISCIPLINE!'

And Max set off up the dune, all on his own, looking really really miserable in the soft sand.

Hasan Xanadu sat down. 'I'm not going up that,' he said. 'Even if there are a thousand flags on the other side.'

Eddie said, 'My dear Hasan doesn't want to climb it. We must go round.'

Samson Two thought this was not a good idea. 'Dr Drax told us to follow the line of the shadow. If we veer off we might never find it again. This is a wind-drift dune. Such dunes can be many miles long – perhaps twenty or even thirty.'

Twenty or thirty miles sounded bad. But climbing that dune looked impossible.

Max was up to his knees in sand. 'I can't do it,' he yelled. He sounded like he was going to cry.

Monsieur Martinet looked uncomfortable. Even he didn't fancy it. 'Let's go round,' he said.

'In a barren landscape like this,' said Samson Two, 'it is difficult to keep your bearings.'

'Difficult,' said Monsieur Martinet, 'is what the best do best. MAX!'

'But Dr Drax said—' pleaded Samson Two.

'Dr Drax expects us to use our initiative,' snapped Monsieur Martinet. 'Initiative is how winners win.'

I was going to say, 'Yes, and getting lost in deserts is how people die.' But they'd already set off, even Samsons One and Two. Monsieur Martinet really did have impressive leadership qualities.

The dune reminded me of my dad. Sometimes if he finished work early in the summer we used to go down to the beach and do dune diving. Have you ever done this? You scramble up a dune, then you just chuck yourself off and run, with the sand giving way beneath you and your stride getting longer and longer until your legs are barely touching the ground so it feels like you're falling but it doesn't matter because the sand is so soft. It's nature's own thrill ride.

Before I even knew I'd decided to do it, I'd joined Max halfway up the dune.

I said to him, 'Are you ready for this?'

'What?'

'Dune diving. Come on – you must've done it before. Give me your hand.'

Looking a bit nervous he gave me his hand. I said, 'Ready?'

'What for?'

'This.'

I jumped.

Gobi Desert sand is even softer than Southport sand. At one point I sank in right to my knees. The next step, half the dune seemed to just disappear underneath me.

As we hit the bottom, the others scattered out of our way like skittles and the two of us lay there staring up at the blue sky and laughing our heads off.

Monsieur Martinet looked down at me and said, 'And your point is?'

'It's really really good. I am sooo going to do that again.'

'Mr Digby,' said Monsieur Martinet, 'you are a child.'

I thought for a second he'd sussed me, but he was just being rude.

I said, 'Anyone else want a go?' and started scrambling up again. When I looked back, Samson Two was following me up, and Hasan, and finally even Florida.

When we were halfway up I said, 'We could do it from here. Or we could carry on to the top, look over the other side and see if we can spot the flag. And if we can't, it doesn't matter – we still have a monster dune dive.'

Everyone agreed and we all scrambled and crawled and helped each other up. The last few feet were the worst. I flung myself at the top of the dune and ended up flat on my face. Florida used my legs to help drag herself up.

Then so did the others. I wriggled up to the top and peeped over. The whole far side of the dune was in shadow. Not a wavy, blurry shadow but a deep, cool pool of shadow, like you could drink from it. And there, fluttering away in the middle of it, was a bright white flag.

And we could all see that if we'd tried to walk around the dune, we'd have spent hours in the heat and maybe never have found the flag at all. Now we'd be there in a few seconds.

'OK,' said Max. 'Let's do it.'

We all held hands, took a breath and jumped. Bombs of sand exploded around us as we went faster and faster. I went completely over in an involuntary somersault and ended up sliding down the last bit head first on my back. I landed more or less at Max's feet. He was holding up the flag and everyone was cheering.

'Did you invent this dune diving?' asked Hasan. 'Because you could make a lot of money from it if you copyright it.'

'My dad used to do it with me. Don't your dads do it with you?'

'I think he would say it was a distraction,' said Samson Two.

'Mine is too busy,' said Hasan.

'Mine is too focused,' said Max.

I looked at Florida and said, 'What about your dad?'

'Of course,' she said, glaring at me. 'He does it all the time. Don't you?'

I'd forgotten that I was her dad.

'You have an enjoyable dad then,' said Hasan. He looked at me like he thought he might be able to buy me.

I just shrugged and took one of the rocket bottles of water out of my backpack and had a sip. Through the plastic, as I was drinking, I could see them all staring at me.

'Did none of you bring water?'

None of them had. I gave them a sip each and said, 'I like to come prepared. It's a dad thing.'

We struggled back up the dune and then dune dived down the other side again, carrying the flag victoriously aloft, like a cohort of avenging Night Elves.

On the way back, the Sun was behind us. Our shadows bobbed about in front of us like mad puppets, while our backs felt like they were on fire. Monsieur Martinet wanted to carry the flag, so I put the distress flare in my bag.

Sometimes we'd see some of the footprints we'd made on the way out. But mostly they'd been blown away by the wind. Unfortunately, the other thing we couldn't see was the Possibility Building.

'It must be miles away if we can't see it,' groaned Florida. 'It's so big. We should be able to see it from Bootle.'

Samson Two explained that it was because the Sun was shining straight at the horizon. 'The light is so strong it seems to dissolve things.'

Then Monsieur Martinet shouted, 'There it is!' He pointed way over to the right and there it was. It looked much nearer than I had expected. We were all so relieved to see it that we more or less started running. And it took a few minutes for us to realize that Samson One was shouting at us to stop. 'Samson Two,' he called, 'has something he would like to say.' We all stopped running, but no one stopped looking at the Possibility Building. 'It's about mirages.'

Oh. No. I did remember having quite a bit of trouble with mirages in the Blasted Lands.

Samson Two started to explain how mirages worked – which you probably already know.

Florida said, 'What has this got to do with anything?'

'Although you can see the building, it isn't really there.'

'Of course it's there,' snapped Monsieur Martinet. 'You're just looking for an excuse to stop walking. Come on, Max. When the going gets tough, the tough get going.'

'I believe the wisest course of action,' said Samson Two, 'would be to wait until nightfall, when the Possibility Building will be easily visible because it is lit up at night.'

'He is a genius,' said Samson One, 'so we should listen to him.'

'The Possibility Building,' said Monsieur Martinet, 'is easily visible now. I know, because I can see it.' And he jogged off, with Max following him.

Samson Two called after them, 'If the building is really there, why is it due north? The only thing we know for certain is that it is due east.'

'How do we know that?' asked Florida.

'Because we followed the shadow of the Possibility Building. The Sun rises in the east, so the shadow was pointing west. Now we want to go in the exact opposite direction.'

Hasan said, 'I want to go with them. It's boring here.'

Eddie Xanadu shrugged. 'Whatever makes my little boy happy,' he said.

Florida said, 'I'm bored too. I'll come with you.'

They set off.

'How can we stop them?' said Samson One. 'They will be exhausted and dehydrated and will probably die.'

'Well,' I said, 'it's their own fault for not listening.'

'That's true. But all the same, she is your daughter.'

I'd forgotten that. I yelled, 'Florida! Come back!' She glanced round. 'Come back, who?' she shouted. I didn't need the instruction book to know she was testing me. If I said, 'Princess,' she'd be so pleased she'd come running back. But it seemed like a better idea to just threaten her. I yelled, 'Come back now or else.'

'Or else what?'

'This.' They'd all forgotten that I had the distress flare. I pulled it out of my bag and held it over my head. 'If you don't all come back right now, I'll set this off and the whole trip will be over.'

Florida stared at me. They all stared at me. I said, 'OK, come back now. All of you.'

They came back. They weren't happy about it, but they came back. Florida was howling. 'It's BOILING. We're never gonna get there by standing still. We're probably going to boil to death. Or die of boredom.'

'I'm sure we'll find something to pass the time,' I said. 'What about sand angels? Like snow angels.'

I lay on the ground and moved my arms up and down to make the shape of wings. Then stood up again. It looked nothing like an angel. It looked like a dip in the sand.

'Or we could write funny things in the sand?' I suggested, 'in huge letters. Come on, think of something funny.'

Florida took the flag and used the flagpole to write one word, 'starving', in massive letters.

Until then we'd been too busy being blasted by wind and sand to think about food. All of a sudden we couldn't think of anything else. We put together what food we had.

As emergency supplies for a desert expedition, it wasn't impressive. Florida had a surprising amount of Haribo. Hasan had a supersize bar of chocolate, which had melted into a kind of goo inside the wrapper. We took turns licking the foil. The goo got sandier every time we passed it round.

Samson Two had two raw eggs. 'Protein is very good for the brain,' he said. No one much fancied them, but when he cracked them open they weren't raw at all. They'd sort of baked in the heat.

Max had a couple of bananas. 'Breakfast of champions,' said his dad. They'd baked inside their skins.

It didn't take long to eat what we had, and people were starting to get restless again when Eddie Xanadu said, 'In fact, I have something that might be helpful.' He unzipped his little bag and took out a Thermos flask. Why would anyone need a flask to keep things warm out here? When he unscrewed the lid, a little plume of cool blue smoke rose from it. The flask was full of soft, white, chilly ice cream. Everyone sighed and leaned forward. It made you feel cooler just to look at it.

'Of course,' said Samson Two, in a kind of dream, 'vacuums can be used to keep things cold as well as warm.' And he started explaining why.

'They also,' smiled Eddie, 'keep things creamy. And vanilla-ish.' He took a teaspoon, dug it into the ice cream and handed the first spoonful to Florida, saying, 'Ladies first.'

Florida closed her eyes as the ice cream slid down her throat.

I said, 'Florida, say thank you.'

'No need to thank me,' said Eddie Xanadu, 'but I would be grateful for your vote this evening. If not, no second helpings!'

All the dads immediately started shouting, 'That's not fair,' and, 'That's bribery!'

**'Not bribery.'** Mr Xanadu smiled. **'Initiative, which, as you say, Monsieur Martinet, is what winners use. Of course, if you don't want your children to have any . . .'**

**Now all the kids started yelling it wasn't fair. Eddie Xanadu clasped the Thermos to his chest and pretended to look disappointed. 'No one wants any?'**

**'We ALL want some,' growled Florida, 'and we'll all vote for you.'**

**'It's so nice to be appreciated,' smiled Eddie.**

**They carried on pushing and shoving until every last scrap had gone. It was just about to be my turn when Samson Two shouted, 'There it is.'**

**And there it was, straight ahead of us – and not way over to the right at all – the Possibility Building, like a great big lipstick in the corner of the sky.**

**After a few minutes it suddenly went dark. There was no sunset. It was more like God had put the light out. And then the building seemed brighter and nearer and we all started walking more and more quickly. Then the light around the building seemed to change from yellow to a kind of strange bluey silver and we saw why – rising up behind the building so that we could only see the edges at first – was the biggest Moon that any of us had ever seen. It was so big and fat and round, like a yellow tunnel, you felt that if you kept walking, you would eventually walk through the horizon and into the Moon.**

**For a while we all stood still and watched it, as though we thought that once it had finished washing the world in a weird blue light it might do some other trick.**

**As the Moon rose higher, the stars came out. The stars of the Gobi Desert are not the same as the stars of Bootle. For one thing, there were a lot more of them – millions of them – in clusters and knots, and they shone as bright as headlights. We mostly walked with our heads in the air – trying to spot shooting stars and pick out constellations all the way back to Infinity Park.**

**While Dinah Drax was collecting the votes in, Samson One came over to me and said, 'If it had not been for you, we would still be walking out there.**

**'That's what dads are for, isn't it? Why do you think Father Christmas is called FATHER Christmas? He's a father, so he gives you presents. Dads give you presents – that's their job.'**

**'Isn't it their job to take care of you – maybe even save your life?'**

**'That's not dads, Liam,' she said, flicking through channels on the wall.  
'That's emergency services.'**

What did the group have to do in this chapter?

What item did Florida have that helped them? How did it help?

Does Liam have any skills? What are they?

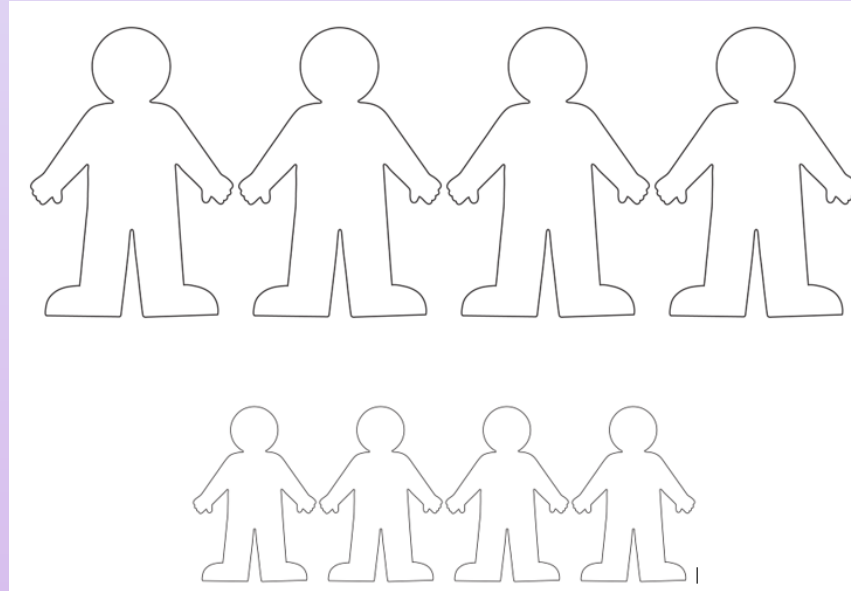
Have any other members of the group been useful? Who and how?

What do you think of Eddie Xanadu's tactic of bringing ice cream?

How did Liam save everybody on the trip?

How is his behaviour different from the other Dads?

**MAIN TASK: USE THE SHEET TO LABEL WHO THE 4 DADS AND 4 CHILDREN ARE ON THE DESERT CHALLENGE.  
ANNOTATE YOUR SHEET TO ADD AS MUCH INFORMATION ABOUT EACH CHARACTER AS YOU CAN**



**Label each character and annotate with as much information as possible. Then write which two characters appear to be the most similar and which two appear to be the most different**