

Section 4 - You Don't Get Extra Lives in Space

It turned out that when Mr. Xanadu was cheerily taking all those photographs of the Penultima he wasn't really interested in happy smiling faces. He was taking photos of the flight simulator and the control panels. He'd sent the photographs to a toy company in Shanghai, asking them to build a full-size working replica of it for Hasan.

Sadly for him, Dr. Drax also owned the Shanghai toy company.

"They told me everything. He even went to them with an idea to make dolls out of you all—to sell. He was going to call them the Astrokids. Can you imagine? Where do these people get their ideas? At least no harm has been done. Except to Mr. Xanadu, of course. He will no longer be the responsible adult accompanying the children into space. That honor will go to the person who came second in the competition. Namely you, Mr. Digby."

"Oh."

"Give yourself a moment for the news to sink in."

Somehow it seemed to take more than a moment. Somehow my brain wouldn't work.

She said, "Mr. Digby?"

"You mean, I could go to space?"

I looked over my shoulder. It was nearly a mile away but there was nothing between me and the Possibility Building. It still filled most of the sky. I was standing in its shadow.

"You do know, of course, what those letters say?" Dr. Drax pointed at the huge black Chinese letters up the side.

"No."

"They are the slogan of Infinity Park. They say, 'The World is My Thrill Ride.'"

"But that's—"

“That’s what you said to me on the phone that day. That’s why I specially selected you. It seemed to sum up everything I was trying to say. You know, Mr. Digby, I always knew you’d be the one who’d go to space in the end. You remind me very much of my own father. You have a similar quality. A sort of childlike quality.”

I could hear the other children talking and laughing behind her. I could feel the cool shadow of the rocket on my back. Was it different if I was going too? Was it all right to send my daughter to space if I was going with her? All I had to do was say “Thank you,” and I would be riding the rocket.

I took a deep breath and I said, “Dr. Drax, I know you think I’m a responsible adult but I’m not. I’m just a boy. An unusually tall and hairy boy, but a boy.”

I felt better straightaway. Like gravity had somehow decreased and I was sort of floating. There. It was all over. No more pretending. No more responsibility. I didn’t care what she said to me now.

Dr. Drax just smiled. She touched my hand. She said, “That’s exactly what I mean about you. You have the right quality. You feel like a child inside. So did Einstein, all his life. He said he never stopped thinking like a child. That’s why he made these great discoveries—”

“No. I don’t mean I feel like a child. I mean I’m really not grown up.”

“Perfect. Exactly. Anyone who feels they’re all grown up is no use to this project. It’s the people who feel they’ve got nothing left to learn—”

“Exactly. I haven’t finished school. I’ve hardly started.”

“I feel just the same way. The universe is so huge. We’ve barely glimpsed it. Give me someone who knows he knows nothing over someone who thinks he knows everything, any day.”

“But—”

“By the way, take good care of Hasan, won’t you? It’s a hard time for him. He’ll be disappointed that his father isn’t coming. And upset, because obviously I’m suing Mr. Xanadu for every penny he’s got.”

“Oh. Really?”

“Yes. I’m determined to put him in jail for what he did.”

“Right. Was there anything else you wanted to say?” I thought it probably wasn’t the best moment to tell her I’d been lying to her for weeks or that I’d tricked her into putting me (aged twelve and a bit) in charge of her rocket (cost \$1 billion).

“In fact,” she said, “can you sign this while you’re here? It’s a release form, giving me permission to use your wonderful phrase—‘The world is my thrill ride’—on all our publicity. Just there. Thank you. And it only remains for me to say, enjoy the ride.”

Questions:

- L) What did the big Chinese letters on the side of the building spell out?
- I) Why did Mr Xanadu's plan to make money from the Penultima fail?
- V) What is a replica?
- E) How would you feel if you found out you were going to space?
- GD) What do you think Dr Drax thought Liam meant when he told her he was really a twelve year old child?

Answers:

- L) The big Chinese letters on the side of the building spell out "The World is my Thrill Ride." (1 mark)
- I) Mr Xanadu's plan failed because Dr Drax owned the toy company he tried to sell his idea to. (1 mark)
- V) A model exactly the same as the original.