

The Garden of the Galaxy

The vision of Abram the Seer as told to David Pennant

Chapter One

“Power is in the barrel of a gun”

The inside of a poky spaceship is the most boring place I know, George thought as he came to. His Drexler spacesuit had handled the heavy acceleration well, as usual, and had left him pleasantly drowsy. However, he was also feeling a little depressed. He didn't know why.

“Dad, you look awful!” Tom declared. Tom was fourteen, George's only son, and had all the confidence of youth. “And when are you going to get a proper space suit? You need a Laeertes like me. It's so much better than your Drexler. Can you sign me in please?”

Tom was already standing up out of his seat, stretching his arms and legs restlessly. George sighed as he unbuckled his seatbelt, but stayed put. As with most space travel, the pod would continue to accelerate gently during their journey to stop them both from floating about, so they could move around or remain comfortably in their seats as they chose.

“I'm quite happy with my Drexler, thank you, and no, Tom, I'm afraid you can't play games in here. Some of the functions of the Cyclops have been disabled, for security reasons, and also, communication with outside is to be kept to a minimum, in other words emergency use only.”

“Dad!” Tom was really frustrated. “You never told me about this! That's so unfair.”

“Well, perhaps that was bad of me, but I reckoned you might never have agreed to come if you had known. This is a secret mission and radio silence is to be total. It's only for a few hours. I hope you won't mind too much. You may not appreciate it now, but it's a great opportunity to see the inner workings of one of the wonders of our age. I had to push hard before they would allow you to come along. Also, you and I have loads to catch up on.” It was hard to get quality time to talk with Tom.

“Well thanks a lot, Dad. I hope it's worth all the sacrifice. Why are you always so down on me?”

This was not going well. “Tom, I really am not down on you, as you put it. Look at this opportunity I have made for you. It's actually a great privilege to be able to see inside the gun housing. Very few people now alive have ever been where we are going, and those that have were almost all engineers. I know they made you sign papers at school that you would never

divulge anything you saw, as I also had to do all over again. In addition, our pod has been subject to intense scrutiny by robots for some hours before we could set off. This is a serious matter.”

“Yeah, yeah, there was stuff to sign, and a geezer asked me loads of questions. It was pretty uncomfortable but I kept my cool. Anyway, where exactly are we going?”

That was better. Tom had accepted being separated from his gaming for a few hours, not that he could have created all the special effects that he was used to at home in this enclosed space. It would not be much of a hardship, and they both knew it. But George would need to proceed carefully. He was determined: there would be no getting angry with Tom this time!

George made eye contact with the deep red eye of the Cyclops – he liked to think of it as being bloodshot - and thought his command. The control panel with all its winking lights (so tacky!) disappeared to be replaced by a backdrop of stars which were obliterated in part by the barrel of a huge gun stretching ahead into the distance.

Normally he would have issued a spoken command to the Cyclops, as they tended to be more reliable than issuing instructions by thought alone, but Tom needed to be shown what his Drexler suit could do. Naturally Tom did not give any sign that he had noticed!

The image of the barrel zoomed in for what seemed like an age – it was an enormously long gun – until a thin band appeared running right and left at right angles to the gun barrel, passing out of vision at the edges of the view. The overall impression was somewhat like a giant crossbow, although neither George nor Tom had ever seen a crossbow.

As the image continued to zoom in towards the joining place of the barrel and the right hand arm, it became clear that the barrel was not uniform in its girth but would occasionally increase in size for a short distance before returning to its former width. The occasional bulges were spaced out regularly.

“There”, George announced as the zooming in finally came to rest, “we enter at a hidden door about here.” He indicated a point a short way along the arm. “The entrance is about a kilometre from the barrel, and I’m assured there is room for us to make our way along inside the arm. There is access to the inside of the barrel at that point, in case it needs to be serviced. Not that it ever has been, until now. No-one currently alive has seen what we are going to see. In fact, nobody has even been inside the arm for several decades. We will need to glide gently without touching anything so as not to cause the slightest disturbance.”

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