

MIA MARCOTTE AND THE ROBOT



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Chapter 1

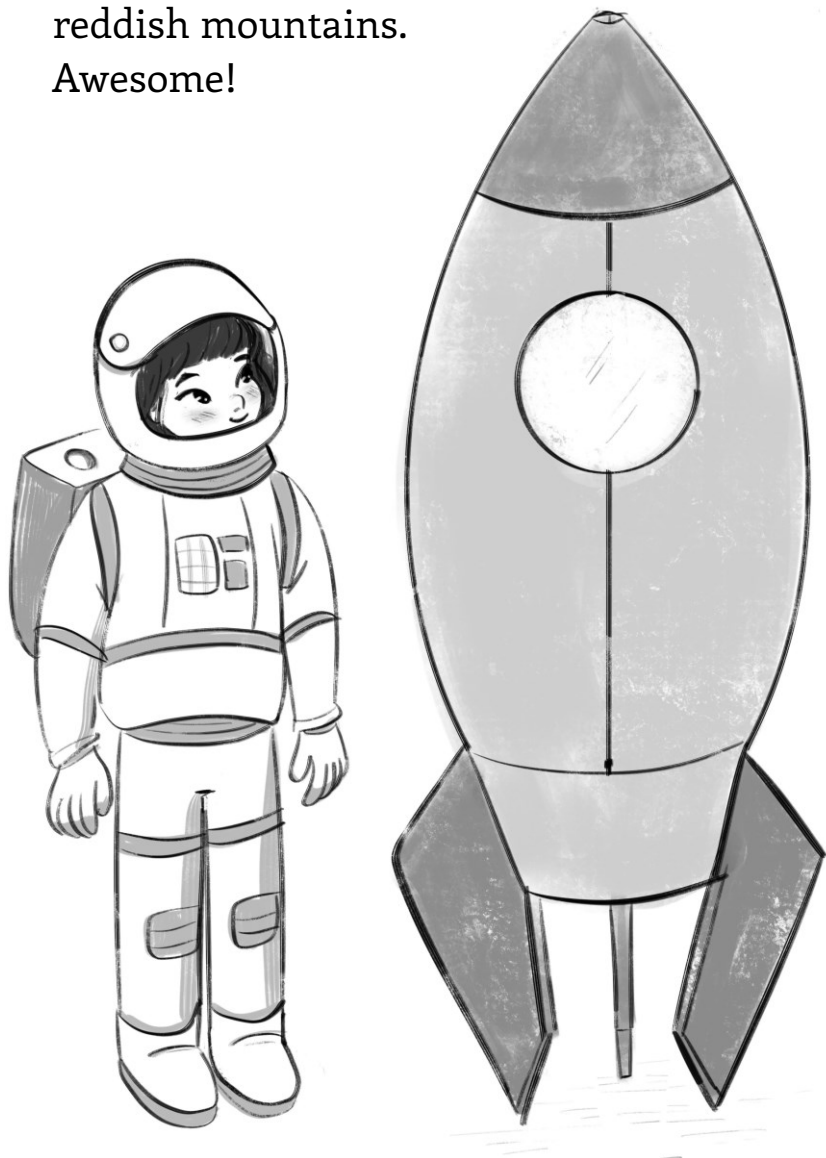
MARS

Mia Marcotte grinned as the red planet showed up in the viewing port of her little spaceship. Soon she would be the first person to set foot on Mars. She had been dreaming about this for so long.

When her spaceship landed on the edge of a crater, Mia pushed her short black hair back, put her space helmet on, and opened the door. With a pounding heart, she stepped out onto the rust-colored dust.

Her body felt much lighter than on Earth. She leaped up and pretended she was flying. She laughed and made a few more jumps.

After she had had enough fun playing with the weaker gravity of Mars, Mia looked around. To her right, there was the crater, large and deep, and to her left, an endless chain of reddish mountains. Awesome!



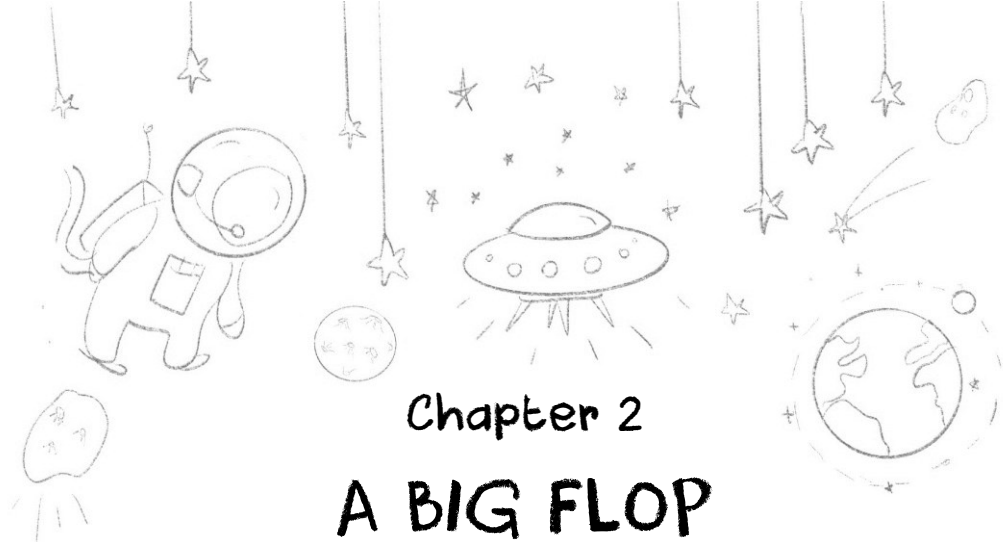
A figure appeared in the distance. It trudged along the crater. Mia recognized it as a Mars rover and hurried over. Dust covered its camera and solar panels. As she leaned forward, ready to dust the rover off, the camera pointed at her, and a familiar voice said, "Choose a balloon."

"What?" Mia strained to hear.

"Mia, choose a balloon for the science experiment," the voice repeated.

She blinked several times. The rover and the crater and the spaceship disappeared. Her science teacher, Ms. Perkins, stood next to Mia's school desk with a box of deflated balloons in her hands. The teacher smiled patiently.

"Uh, sure," Mia said, and took the red balloon.



Chapter 2

A BIG FLOP

Mia slipped her rubber gloves on, readjusted her safety goggles, and stared at her materials: a flask, a bottle of vinegar, a pack of baking soda, a funnel, and a deflated red balloon.

Mia scratched her head. *What am I supposed to do with all these?* she wondered, peering at her friend Ella at the next desk.

The girl with a long blond ponytail smiled as she filled her flask with vinegar. It seemed like having a physicist mom helped Ella enjoy science class.



Neither of Mia's parents were good at science. *That must be why, for me, she thought, science class is not enjoyable at all.*

Mia sighed. Suddenly a thought flashed into her mind. She should just copy everything that Ella was doing. Easy-peasy!

Grinning at her brilliant idea, she grabbed the bottle of vinegar and poured the transparent liquid into her flask.

Ew, it stinks! Mia wrinkled her nose.

Then Ella spooned baking soda into her balloon, using the funnel. Mia did the same.

Finally, Ella placed her balloon on top of the flask neck and let the white powder fall through. Instantly a million bubbles filled the flask, and the balloon inflated into a large green sphere.

Wow! Mia's eyes widened. She might like this experiment after all.

Spinning around, she watched as more spheres emerged in the classroom. They

were pink and blue and yellow, like colorful planets in a distant galaxy.

Mia's mind buzzed. With a black marker, she drew a tiny figure in a space suit on her balloon. *When it inflates, it will look like an astronaut has landed on the red planet!* she thought, giggling.

"Gosh!" she heard from behind her back. Mia frowned and peered over her shoulder. The boy with big round glasses under his safety goggles was trying to lift the balloon that hung lifelessly from his flask neck.

Ms. Perkins came to his desk. "You used too little vinegar, Zachary," said the teacher, "so the chemical reaction was weak and couldn't inflate your balloon."

The boy pursed his lips.

"Don't get upset, Zachary." Ms. Perkins smiled. "You can always try again."

Zach nodded. When the teacher walked away, he reached into his pocket for a marshmallow and put it into his mouth. And then he noticed Mia's gaze.

He lifted his chin
and readjusted
his glasses.

“I bet your
balloon
won’t
inflate
either,”
he grumbled.

What? Mia
glared at the boy.
Her balloon *would*
inflate! And it would inflate big!

She snorted and turned to her desk.
Ms. Perkins had said Zach had added too
little vinegar, so Mia had to put in more.
As much as possible!

She grabbed the bottle and poured all
the remaining liquid into her flask until
it was almost full. Then she attached her
balloon to the flask neck, grinned, and
tipped it upward.

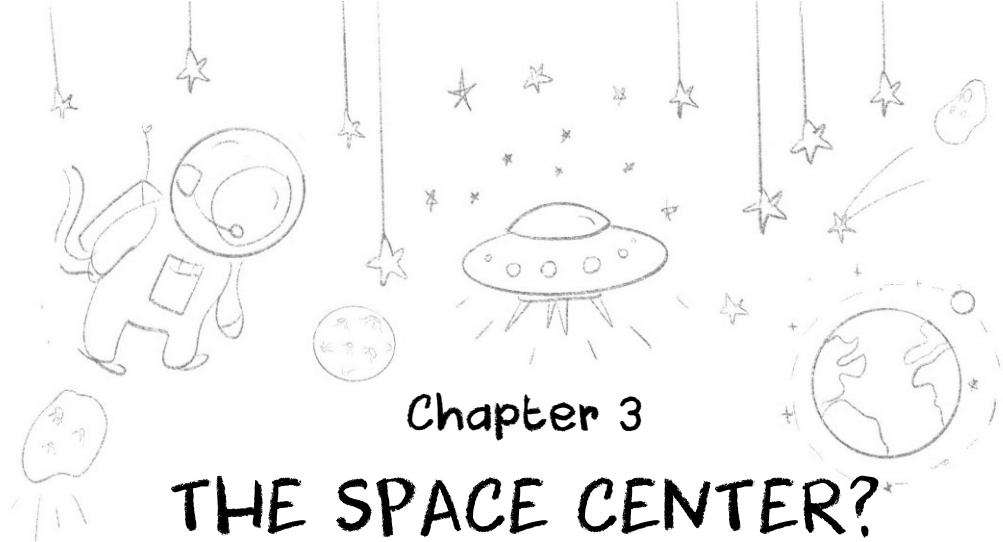
The next second, a tall white jet
rocketed the balloon up to the ceiling.



Splashes of foam covered Mia's desk as she jumped back.

She removed her smudged goggles and looked up. A piece of red plastic was dangling from the lamp.

Oops! That was probably too much.
Her cheeks flushed.



Chapter 3

THE SPACE CENTER?

Ms. Perkins didn't get mad. Instead, she helped Mia clean her desk and safety goggles, then went to the blackboard and started explaining the chemical reaction between vinegar and baking soda again.

Mia tried hard to pay attention, but she couldn't stop thinking about the tiny figure on the red planet. She reached for her shorts pocket and pulled out a purple sketchbook with a frayed, star-patterned cover.

Scratching her head with a pencil, Mia squinted at the blank page for a moment. Then her eyes gleamed, and she began drawing: an apple tree, a smiley young

girl in a space suit, a watering can in the girl's hands, and a rocket in the distance.

"Mia," she heard Zach whisper from behind. "What are you drawing?" His spiky-haired head tried to peep over her shoulder.



"Nothing," she whispered back, covering the sketchbook with one hand.

For a second, a wrinkle appeared between Zach's eyebrows. Then he grinned. "Ha! I know what it is."

Mia felt a knot in her stomach. "Really?" she asked.

"I bet it's a unicorn. Or a fairy. All girls are nuts about magic creatures." Zach laughed.

Mia snorted. Unicorns and fairies were Ella's favorites, not hers. But before she could respond, Ms. Perkins clapped her

hands, asking for the third-graders' attention.

"Class, you know there'll be a school science fair next Monday. Is everyone ready?"

Many kids shouted yes.

Ugh! Mia bit her bottom lip. That science fair had completely slipped her mind. She had been too busy reading the new book on space adventures she had recently got from the school library.

"Wonderful!" Ms. Perkins smiled. "In that case, I can tell you a little secret." Her voice lowered to a whisper. "Those of you who present great projects at the science fair will go on a special field trip ... to the space center!"

The class went crazy. A few boys jumped from their seats, yelling all at once.

"Really?"

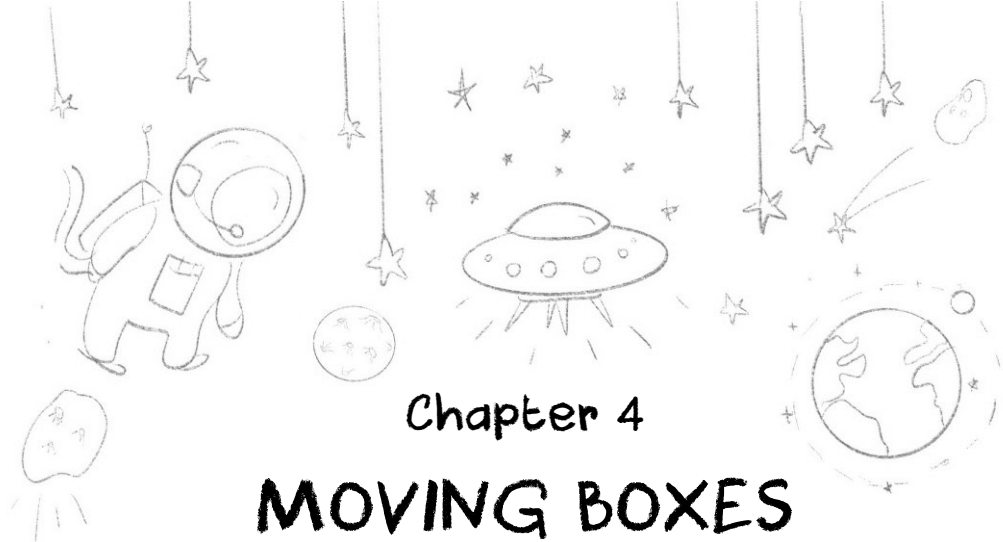
"Will there be astronauts?"

"And rockets?"

"Will we get into the cabin?"

In the middle of the uproar, Mia sat still, breathless. The space center? No way in the world she would miss that field trip!





Chapter 4

MOVING BOXES

Sweat shone on Mia's and Ella's foreheads as they biked home. Mia held her face up, catching the sunlight and inhaling the sweet smell of blossoming mock oranges. Early summer was her favorite time of the year.

"It'd be cool to go on a field trip!" Ella shouted, smiling. "I hope my cloud in a plastic bottle will be selected. I've tried it with Mom a few times already, and it comes out amazing. Sometimes I wonder if science is real magic, and grown-ups just hide it from us." Ella giggled.

"Yeah, maybe," Mia said, staring at the road in front. She was trying to think of

a project she could make for the science fair, and her friend's constant chatting wasn't helping. Ella could talk for ages, while Mia preferred listening. That was probably why they were friends.

When the girls stopped at the intersection where their ways split, Ella asked, "And what's your project, Mia?"



“Uh ... I’ve not decided ... yet.” She rubbed the back of her neck.

“But it’s in three days!” Ella widened her blue eyes. “Mom and I spent two weeks preparing my project. Can you maybe ask your parents for help?”

Mia shrugged. “Um, I guess ...” she said, though she knew she wouldn’t ask. Her architect dad and accountant mom didn’t seem like a dream team for a science project.

Before Ella could ask further questions, Mia quickly waved her off and turned right onto her street.

It looked unusual.

A huge gray van occupied all the space in front of the Marcottes’ family house. Two men in yellow jackets were unloading boxes while Mia’s dad counted them.

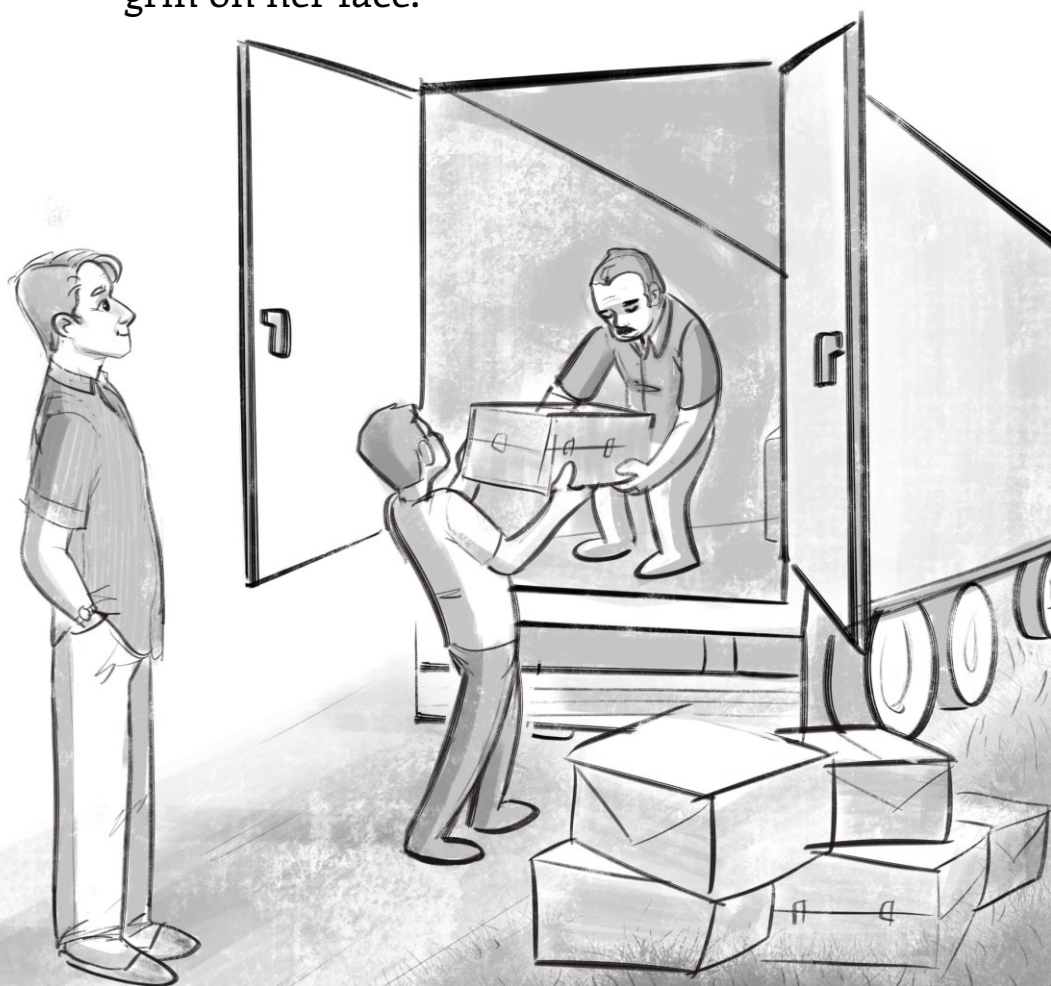
Oh, is it today? Has Auntie arrived? Mia thought as her face brightened.

Her aunt Serena lived in Paris and came every summer to spend time with

Mia's family. She always brought her books. A lot of books, about space exploration and aliens and robots.

But most importantly, Serena was an engineer. She could help Mia build the best science project ever so that she could visit the space center!

Mia jumped from her bike with a wide grin on her face.



“Hi, Dad! Where’s Auntie?”

“Hello, louloute!” Mia’s dad turned to her. He still called her that French pet name even though she wasn’t a baby anymore.

“Serena hasn’t arrived yet. Only her stuff,” her dad said. “She had an emergency in her lab, so she won’t come before next week.”

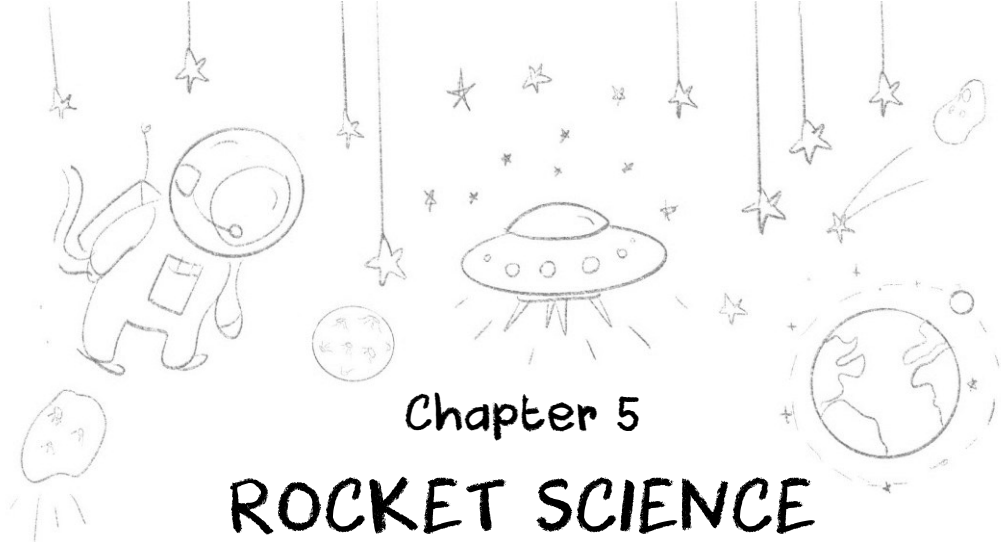
Mia’s smile faded. *Oh no! It’ll be too late!*

“Just a few more days, little one, and you’ll get your beloved aunt for the whole summer.” Mr. Marcotte patted her shoulder.

She sighed, tilted her chin down, and headed to the porch.

“Wait, louloute!” her dad called. “I almost forgot. Serena said there’s fragile equipment in her boxes, so please stay away from the guest room until she arrives. Okay?”

“O-okay.”



Chapter 5

ROCKET SCIENCE

Mia dropped her school backpack on the floor and collapsed on her bed. The cover felt warm, heated by the sunlight from the window.

“Welcome to Mars! Welcome!” a screeching voice came from above.

“Hi, Martian!” She sat up and stretched her arm forward.

A big green parrot flew down from the curtain rod and sat on her wrist. He flipped his tail, then clambered onto her shoulder and uttered, “Spaceship under attack! SOS!”

Mia snickered. She felt proud that her pet had memorized phrases from her fa-

vorite books. She often read out loud, and Martian was her best and only listener.

“Martian, can you imagine, there’s going to be a field trip to the space center!” Mia said, walking back and forth. “But it’s only for the kids who make the best science fair projects.”

The parrot got off her shoulder and flew onto his perch. There he tilted his head to one side, his yellow eyes staring at Mia.



“And I don’t have any project. Not an idea!” She shrugged. “Even worse, if you could just see the disaster I caused to-day ... there was foam everywhere. And instead of inflating nice and big, my balloon shot up into the air. Like a rocket!”

Martian bobbed his head as if trying to show that he understood. Mia petted him lovingly. Then she reached for her sketchbook and plonked herself down on the fluffy carpet, legs crossed. Without thinking, she drew a rocket. It had an elongated body, a cone-shaped top, and three fins.

“Rocket! Rocket!” the parrot sang.

Mia was startled by a sudden idea. She turned to her bookcase. At least two shelves were occupied by books on space adventures. Many of them described rockets, big and small, realistic and imaginary.

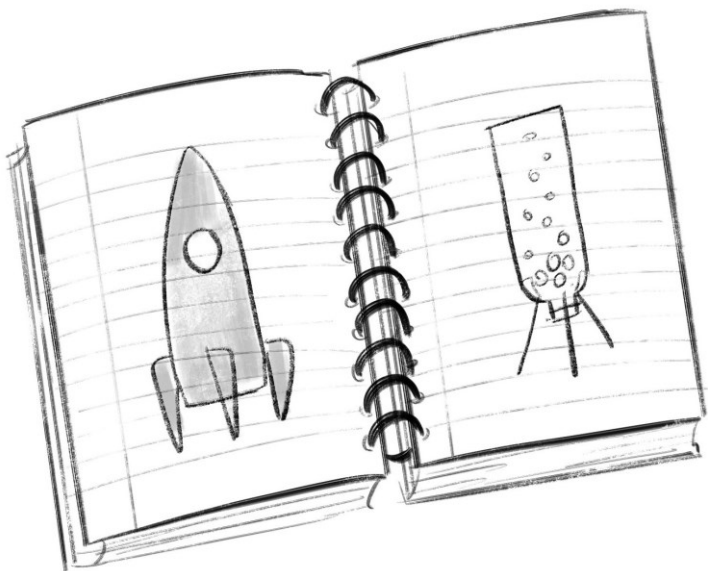
After reading all these books, wasn’t she a rocket expert? Perhaps she could

make her own rocket. One that could fly on vinegar and baking soda!

That sounded great, but what would she build it from? She scratched her head with the pencil.

After a moment of thought, Mia grinned and added a new sketch right next to the first one. It looked like an inverted bottle standing on three sticks. And it had bubbles inside.

“I guess it may work.” Mia glanced at Martian hopefully.





Peeking out the kitchen window, Mia clasped a basket full of supplies to her chest. Her dad was chatting with the movers outside. Great, the way to the backyard was free.

She gave a hand sign to the parrot, left the kitchen, and quickly crossed the hallway, toward the back door. Empty, with just an old oak tree and a terrace table, the backyard looked like a perfect rocket launch site.

Mia laid everything down on the terrace table: an empty plastic bottle, three chopsticks, a tape, a cork, a funnel, a bottle of vinegar, a pack of baking soda, and a pair of yellow rubber dishwashing gloves.

“Rocket!” Martian made a circle above the backyard.

“Careful! Don’t fly too far!”

He made another circle and sat on the terrace table. After a brief inspection, he

grabbed the tape roll, threw it onto the ground, and hopped joyfully.

“Martian, stop it! This is not for playing.” Mia shook her finger at her pet. Looking disappointed, Martian flapped his wings and took flight, landing on the oak tree.

Mia picked up the tape and put it back on the table. Taking the plastic bottle, she turned it upside down and taped the chopsticks around it. Then she ripped a blank page from the sketchbook, made a cone, and fixed it to the top.

Hmm, looks good, but something is missing. She rubbed her chin. *Oh, right, the sign!*

In a minute, a strip of paper crossed the bottle. The sign read “MSM,” for “Mia’s Space Mission.”

Mia grinned.

Now it was time to add the rocket fuel. She stretched her hand to the vinegar but suddenly stopped. She had forgotten about the safety goggles!

A frown crossed her face. The problem was that she didn't have any. But could she use something else instead? she wondered. Like sunglasses? Or the Grinch mask from Halloween? Oh, wait. What about her diving mask? It had served her well last summer, when she was exploring the lake by her grandma's village.

Mia rushed to her room. In two minutes, she returned with an orange diving mask covering half of her face. Even better than the safety goggles!

Martian tilted his head to one side and stared at Mia from the oak tree.

"Sorry, Martian. I have no safety equipment for you. So stay there until it's over. Okay?" she said, slipping on the dishwashing gloves. Martian flipped his wings but remained on the tree.

Carefully Mia poured vinegar into the plastic bottle until it was half full. Then she grabbed the pack of baking soda and looked at her pet excitedly.

“Ready? Three ... two ... one!”

As soon as the baking soda fell through the bottleneck, Mia closed it with the cork as tightly as she could, placed the rocket on the ground, and jumped away.

Bubbles started forming inside the rocket, but it didn’t move. Mia waited for a few seconds. Still nothing.

She sighed.

Martian hopped down onto the grass right next to the rocket, gazing at it curiously.

“No, Martian, go away!” She raced to catch her pet but flipped and tumbled on the grass. *Ouch!*

At the same moment, the cork shot out of the bottleneck. The rocket launched off the ground, spattering a sea of foam around it.

But Mia couldn’t see anything. Her diving mask was covered in foam. She sprang up, removing the mask. Martian was sitting on the terrace table with a playful look, as if nothing had happened.



Whew, he isn't hurt. But where's the rocket? Mia raised her eyebrows.

Then she heard somebody yelling in the neighbor's backyard.