



Chapter 1

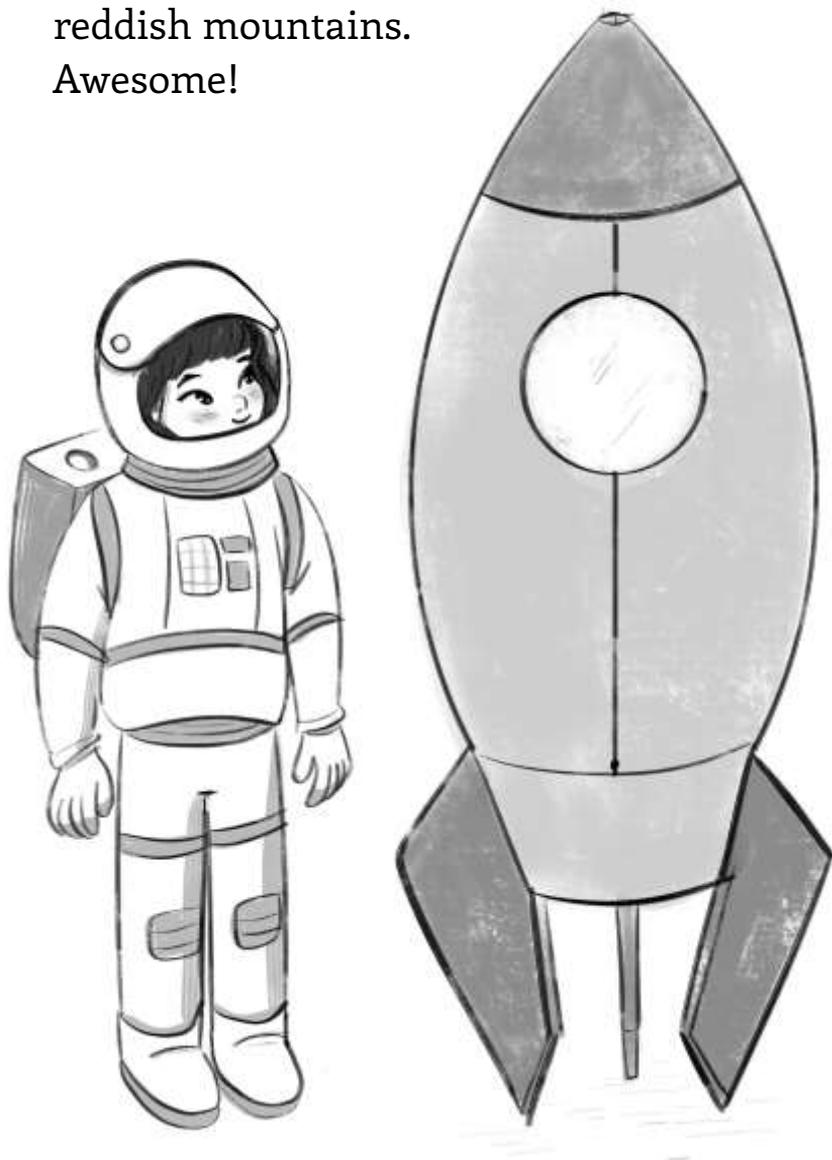
MARS

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.