



Martin Bridge: Sky's the Limit
Book 7: 1 of 2 short stories

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WORMHOLE

by Jessica Scott Kerrin

When Martin woke up, his first thought was that his prize should arrive at the post office today! Just to be certain, he bounced out of bed and padded over to the Zip Rideout calendar on his wall.

Zip Rideout, Space Cadet, was Martin's favorite cartoon superhero.

And a bowl of Zip Rideout Space Flakes was Martin's all-time favorite breakfast.

So when the Zip Rideout Trivia Contest was announced, Martin was thrilled. He eagerly ate box after box of the sugary star and comet shapes until he had collected

a complete set of cards. Then he mailed them off to the cereal company.

The contest instructions had stated that it would take five to six weeks to receive the out-of-this-world prize: Zip Rideout's Space Race Game, *Deluxe* Edition.

Zip's game boasted a glow-in-the-dark map of the Milky Way, a genuine chip from a meteor, inflatable planets, life-size cutouts of Zip Rideout and his archenemy, Crater Man, and a wormhole, some assembly required.

Martin had charted five weeks on his calendar and had drawn a rocket on the square marking the date that his prize should arrive. Then, as the days dragged by, he had crossed off thirty-five squares. To Martin's delight, today featured his rocket blasting off.

This was it!

"Martin!" his dad called from the foot of the stairs. "Are you on your way down?"

"Onwards and upwards," Martin called back. It was something Zip Rideout said at the start of every mission.

He yanked on his clothes, then slid down the railing with flair.

"Your mom has a surprise for you," announced Martin's dad as Martin entered the kitchen.

Martin's heart started to pound. His parcel! It *had* arrived! That meant he would be the first in his neighborhood to own the game!

"Let's wait and tell Martin tonight," said his mom. "I want to be sure first. Besides, you know he can't keep a secret!"

"What do you mean?" Martin demanded, instantly offended.

"You can't," said his mom matter-of-factly.

"Can too!" Martin insisted.

“Oh, really?” said his mom. “What about my anniversary gift that you spilled the beans about? Or telling the Junior Badgers how Zip’s movie ended before hardly any of the troop had a chance to see it? Or informing everyone on the bus about Stuart’s fear of clowns?”

Stuart was Martin’s best friend.

“Your mom’s right, Sport,” said his dad, chuckling.

“Okay, okay,” muttered Martin.

He poured himself a bowl of Space Flakes and turned the cereal box so that Zip faced him.

Martin’s mom took a sip of her coffee.

“I have a lot of meetings today,” she said to Martin’s dad. “The last one might go quite late.”

“No problem,” said his dad, layering more jam on his toast. “I’ll make dinner tonight. How about a barbecue?”

“That’d be great,” said his mom, and she smiled. “You haven’t charred something in a long time.”

Martin’s dad rolled his eyes at Martin.

Bored by this go-nowhere conversation, Martin was anxious to steer back to his surprise, which he was certain was waiting at the post office.

“Do you need to pick up anything on your way home today, Mom?” he prodded.

She stared blankly at Martin for a second or two.

“Oh, that’s right! Milk!” exclaimed his mom. She turned back to his dad. “Could you get some? We’re almost out.”

“Sure,” said his dad.

They returned to munching their toast.

Just look at them, thought Martin. They were in cahoots, avoiding *any* talk of his prize. But Martin wasn't fooled. His game *had* arrived! He just knew it!

“Better get a move on, Sport,” said Martin's dad, looking up at the clock. “You're going to be late for the bus.”

Martin's cranky-pants driver, Mrs. Phips, hated it when passengers kept her waiting. Martin scooped up the last spoonfuls of cereal, then dashed upstairs to brush his teeth and grab his knapsack.

But when he got to the top of his driveway, the bus already stood rumbling. The accordion door folded open, and Martin reluctantly climbed aboard.

“Shake a leg,” Mrs. Phips growled, followed by her predictable muttering about punctuality.

Martin hesitated at the top of the steps. He knew that his mom wanted the surprise to be a secret. But maybe if he told Mrs. Phips, she wouldn't be so annoyed with him.

“I'm getting Zip Rideout's Space Race Game today,” he whispered. “*Deluxe* Edition,” he added for good measure.

“I fail to see how that would make you late,” was her crabby comeback.

Martin swallowed. What a waste of a secret! Ears burning, he made his way to the back of the bus to join Stuart.

“Late again, hey Martin?” said Stuart sympathetically, shoving over to give him room.

“She always makes such a big deal about it,” Martin complained as he flopped down.

Then he perked up. No way was he going to let Mrs. Phips’s grouchiness take away from his excitement.

“Tomorrow’s Saturday,” said Martin. “Got any plans?”

“I have to help Mom tidy her props shed,” said Stuart, shoulders slouching.

That wouldn’t be much fun, thought Martin. Maybe he could help Stuart get out of it. This time, Martin would put his secret to good use.

“Why don’t you come to my house instead?” suggested Martin. “I’m getting Zip Rideout’s Space Race Game today,” he bragged. “*Deluxe* Edition!”

“Are you sure?!” exclaimed Stuart. “You’ve been waiting for that prize forever!”

“I know!” said Martin. “But Mom’s acting all secret-y. Zip’s game just has to be it.”

“I’ll still have to help Mom,” said Stuart, “but she’ll probably let me off early to come over. After all, it’s Zip Rideout’s Space Race Game! *Deluxe* Edition! I hear the rules say you can crash land up to five times before you have to surrender to Crater Man!”

“Unless you fly through the wormhole,” said Martin with authority. “That means you can do a start-over.”

“The wormhole,” repeated Stuart in awe. “I can’t wait to see it!”

Martin’s enjoyment of Stuart’s response was only slightly dampened when he remembered his mom’s words about not being able to keep a secret.

Oh well, thought Martin. One little slip-up was no big deal. Well, two. But telling Mrs. Phips probably didn't count since she had been such a grump-head about it. If Martin could, he would fly through the wormhole for a start-over and not tell her in the first place.

When the bus arrived at school, they found Alex, Martin's other best friend, waiting by the front door. He was sporting his Zip Rideout space goggles.

"Onwards and upwards!" said Alex.

He gave them the official Zip Rideout salute, which he did every morning. But that wasn't why Martin decided to tell him about his surprise. In fairness, Martin reasoned, he could not tell one best friend without telling the other.

"I'm getting Zip Rideout's Space Race Game today!" he exclaimed. "*Deluxe Edition!*"

Alex peeled off his goggles. "Really? Today?"

"Yes!" said Martin. "And Stuart's coming over tomorrow to play it. Can you come over, too?"

"Sure thing!" Alex promised. "I just hope I don't end up flying through the exploding yellow nebula. My cousin told me he did that and was stranded on an unknown moon for half the game!"

The bell rang, and the boys bounded through the doors and down the hall to their classroom in hot debate over how to avoid the nebula.

When the principal's voice came over the PA system, everyone hushed.

"Attention, girls and boys. I have a few announcements."

Martin felt great, having told his two best friends about the surprise and seeing them so keen. Imagine if he could get on the microphone and announce his big news to the entire school!

“As you know, we’ve had a few bicycles stolen from the playground. So, we’re getting two new bike racks next week, with enough space for all students who need to lock their bikes.”

Dullsville, thought Martin, who had to bus to school with cranky Mrs. Phips.

“Second, our school janitor wants to remind you not to feed Polly the vegetables from your lunches. She doesn’t like them either, and it makes a mess of her birdcage.”

Ho hum, thought Martin, whose mom regularly put crackers into Martin’s lunchbox as a proper treat for the school parakeet.

“And finally, I want to remind you that next week some of you will be going to the dinosaur exhibit at the museum with your class. Don’t forget that you need to bring in your signed permission slip, or you won’t be able to go.”

Now *that* was exciting news, but hearing it wasn’t the reason Martin felt as if he would burst.

“Have a good weekend, girls and boys.”

Then the PA system went dead.

Martin squirmed even more.

“Good morning, class,” sang out Mrs. Keenan, their homeroom teacher.

“Good morning, Mrs. Keenan,” chimed the class.

The monotony of this daily exchange was excruciating to Martin. His hand practically shot up on its own.

“A question already?” asked Mrs. Keenan, one eyebrow raised.

“Not a question. I have an announcement to make,” said Martin proudly.

“Go ahead then,” said Mrs. Keenan.

Martin stood for dramatic effect. “Today, I’m getting Zip Rideout’s Space Race Game! *Deluxe* Edition!”

A wave of delight swept across the faces in the room.

It was exactly the reaction Martin had hoped for!

“And everyone’s invited to my house tomorrow to play!” he added, the last part slipping out in his excitement.

Laila Moffatt, who sat in front of Martin and blocked his view of the blackboard with her big curly hair, twirled around and beamed at him. She did that about a hundred times a day, which Martin found annoying.

“Sounds great!” she said in her usual pushy way.

Oops, thought Martin. Perhaps he had been overly generous with his invitation. Once again, he wished that he had the wormhole on hand so he could do a start-over.

“You don’t like Zip,” said Martin flatly.

“But I like games,” said Laila in a little voice. She gave him a hurt look before turning around.

Martin sat down. Laila’s unwelcome reply reminded him of how his mom had told him he couldn’t keep a secret. He might have been able to defend his decision to tell his two best friends. Now he had gone ahead and told the whole class.

Even Laila Moffatt.

But cripes! Zip Rideout’s Space Race Game?! *Deluxe* Edition?!

Who could blame him for spreading the news faster than a meteor blazing across the sky?

Martin tapped Laila on her pointy shoulder.

“You’re invited, too,” he said, mustering some enthusiasm.

“Really?” said Laila brightly. “I heard you talking about the exploding yellow nebula. I’ll be sure not to get stranded!”

It would be just like Laila to win, thought Martin, regretting his invitation once again. He made a note to pull out his book on the night sky when he got home. Brushing upon the universe would give him an edge during tomorrow’s game.

“Better turn around,” whispered Martin when he noticed that Mrs. Keenan was staring at them.

For the rest of the morning, Martin had a hard time concentrating. He was too busy thinking about game rules involving hurtling meteors and systems of dwarf stars to fully appreciate the importance of adjectives, the steps for dividing numbers, or the names of all five oceans.

Finally, it was noontime. As usual, Martin sat with Alex and Stuart. He began to unlatch his lunchbox, then paused to listen to his friends’ conversation. To his dismay, they were chatting about the upcoming soccer game.

How could they have forgotten about his exciting news so quickly?!

Martin silently ate his meal, cookies first, frustrated by their short attention spans. And he barely nodded at Polly, who squawked her thanks for his lunchbox crackers.

When the last class of the day rolled around, Martin was determined to get everyone refocused on tomorrow’s big event. Sure, his secret was out, but that only

counted if everyone remembered it. His thoughts were interrupted when the art teacher strode into the studio.

“We’re going to finish our ‘Where I Live’ module. So I’d like today’s artwork to feature your backyards,” announced Mrs. Crammond.

Martin had no trouble deciding what to paint. Art class was his favorite, and Mrs. Crammond had presented him with the very wormhole he sought. Now he could do a start-over and get the class back on track. He quickly set up his easel and had a blast with the paints.

Later, the class walked around admiring one another’s work. Martin noticed there were lots of vivid green lawns, flowers on thick sturdy stems and birds that looked like upside-down W’s. Pretty standard stuff.

“Oh, my!” exclaimed Mrs. Crammond. “What have we here?” She stood in front of Martin’s easel while a crowd gathered around.

Martin’s painting was blazing with fiery colors, and it featured people wearing space goggles. Some were climbing up to a tree fort. Others were crouching behind a smoking barbecue or under a picnic table. They all had H₂O Faster Blasters.

“This is the class playing Zip Rideout’s Space Race Game at my house,” announced Martin. “The first cadet who successfully outsmarts Crater Man and saves the Orange Planet wins.”

“So this must be you,” said Mrs. Crammond, pointing to a figure holding a map of the Milky Way. “Nicely done!”

“Onwards and upwards,” confirmed Martin, giving her the official Zip Rideout salute.

Other classmates saluted, too, with murmurs of, “See you tomorrow, Martin.”

“I’ll definitely avoid the nebula,” Laila whispered as everyone shuffled off to the next easel.

Then she beamed at Martin. His ears burned.

Martin hastily rejoined the group, but he didn’t have much to say about anyone else’s work. He was too caught up with Saturday’s plans, right up until the end-of-school bell rang.

The ride home was agonizingly slow. Martin’s mind raced as the bus rumbled along its route, stopping a zillion times too many. By now he was certain that his mom’s story about lots of meetings was a ruse. Instead, Martin was convinced that she planned to pick up his prize from the post office, then get home early and help Martin’s dad set up the game in the backyard.

A barbecue!

Good one, Dad, thought Martin smugly.

When he realized that the next stop was his, he scooped up his belongings. At the same time, he mentally prepared himself for what he was about to see.

Maps of galaxies! A meteor chip! Inflatable planets! Zip Rideout and Crater Man! The wormhole! Martin’s stomach began to do flip-flops.

He leapt off the bus and saluted to Stuart. Then Martin strode up the driveway, whistling noisily so that his parents would know he was coming. He rounded the side of his house and flung open the gate.

“I’m home!” he announced.

There was no reply

He took an uncertain step forward.

Still nothing.

A quick survey of the backyard told him everything he needed to know.

No maps of galaxies. No meteor chip. No inflatable planets. No Zip Rideout and Crater Man. No wormhole.

Just a smoking barbecue.

Cripes!

A wave of disappointment hit Martin. Then he was hit by another wave, this one filled with anger.

“Oh, hi Sport,” said his dad as Martin stormed into the kitchen. “Do you want something to drink? I remembered to pick up the milk.”

“What happened to the surprise?” demanded Martin indignantly.

“Right. About that,” said his dad, suddenly serious. He pulled up a chair and sat down to face Martin. “Your mom didn’t get the promotion she was hoping for.”

“The what?” asked Martin, confused.

“The promotion,” repeated Martin’s dad gravely. “She thought she was going to be offered a job with more responsibility. But someone else was chosen.”

“*That* was the surprise?” said Martin, dropping his knapsack to the floor.

“Yes,” said his dad, missing Martin’s tone. He laid a calm hand on Martin’s shoulder. “Your mom’s pretty disappointed. We’ll have to be extra kind to her this weekend.”

Martin frowned. Sure, he felt bad for his mom. He supposed that a promotion with more responsibility was a good thing in the world of grown-ups.

But *he* was the one who had been expecting Zip's game all day long! *Nothing* could be more disappointing than that!

"I'll be up in my room," muttered Martin, who could plainly see that no one would be interested in cheering *him* up tonight.

An even more horrible thought struck Martin as he climbed the stairs. Now he faced the grisly job of calling each and every one of his classmates to cancel tomorrow's plans.

Including Laila Moffatt!

He groaned, desperate for a wormhole to take back the whole day!

Martin lay on his bed, listlessly flipping through his night sky book and putting off his hateful telephone task as long as possible. He paused when he heard the sound of his mom's arrival.

The low murmur of his parents' voices in the kitchen went on for quite some time. Martin was grateful that his dad was being nice, because Martin was in no mood to put aside his own colossal disappointment.

Then Martin heard his mom coming up the stairs. But something about her footsteps sounded different. They were heavier, perhaps, and slower. She hesitated outside his door before knocking softly.

"Come in," said Martin.

"Got something for you," said his mom.

Martin could tell she tried to say it happily, for his benefit. Only her words came out all skinny.

She put a parcel down beside him. One quick glance told him it was the game that he had been so desperate for.

“Surprise,” said his mom, but there was no exclamation mark. “I came home at lunch and found a notice from the post office saying that a parcel had arrived. I was pretty sure it was your prize, so I picked it up on my way home.”

For five long weeks, Martin had dreamed of this moment. He tore into the package at the speed of light.

“Oh, wow!” he exclaimed, pulling out the pieces. “Look at this! And this! And *this!*”

“Very nice,” said Martin’s mom.

Martin paused.

What was it about her that was throwing him off? Maybe the way she was slouching a bit? Maybe the way she hung her head ever so slightly? She looked smaller somehow.

His mom reached into the box and pulled out — of all things — the exploding yellow nebula. Then she stared into space, as if stranded on an unknown moon.

Something caught in Martin’s throat. He had never seen his mom looking so lost.

Perhaps that promotion had meant just as much to her as Zip’s game meant to him.

Yet, despite her disappointment, she had still gone to the post office.

For Martin.

And what did I do, thought Martin sheepishly, looking at the game parts tossed higgledy-piggledy about his bed.

“Enjoy,” his mom said with a touch of sadness. She turned to go, unaware that she was still holding the dreaded piece that Alex had warned Martin about.

“Wait,” said Martin. He took it gently from her. “You’d lose the game if you flew through the exploding yellow nebula.”

“Thanks for the tip,” she replied quietly.

Martin tossed the nebula back into the game box. His plans for tomorrow were certainly back on track. But having everyone over to play no longer seemed so important.

Martin glanced down and spotted the wormhole. He realized that what he wanted, more than anything, was a start-over for his mom.

Martin pushed the game box aside.

“How about you and me doing something tomorrow? Just the two of us,” he suggested. “The sky’s the limit.”

“Don’t you have plans with Alex and Stuart?” she asked.

Martin knew that if he told his mom the whole class was coming over, she would definitely turn him down.

“No plans,” Martin assured her.

Some secrets were definitely worth keeping.

She studied Martin, then gave him her old familiar smile.

“I’d like that,” his mom said in a voice more like herself. “Very much,” she added sincerely.

“Me too,” Martin replied.

Barbecue smoke wafted through Martin’s window.

“I better go help your dad,” said Martin’s mom.

As soon she left, Martin picked up the wormhole and tossed it in with the nebula. Then he dug out the class list from his knapsack, determined to get a jump start on those calls.