



*Martin Bridge: Out of Orbit*  
Book 5: 1 of 2 short stories

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*SPYDER*

by Jessica Scott Kerrin

One by one, Martin's classmates announced what they wanted to be when they grew up.

Martin could think of nothing more exciting than exploring bold, uncharted worlds like his cartoon hero, Zip Rideout, Space Cadet. So when his turn came, he proudly replied, "Astronaut."

Just like his two best friends, Alex and Stuart.

It turned out that astronaut was the most popular answer in Martin's class, with a few firefighters, police officers, hockey players, paleontologists and ballerinas sprinkled in.

"I'm delighted there are so many astronauts in the room," said their art teacher, Mrs. Crammond, "because I have a special surprise for you."

She paused so that the class could buzz with speculation. When everyone was fit to spin out of orbit, she announced, “I’ve arranged for an illustrator to visit our school. And this illustrator *loves* astronauts.”

Martin’s stomach did a happy little leap. He knew what illustrators did. They drew for posters and magazines and stuff.

And the work of his favorite illustrator was right there in his desk. Martin pulled out a dog-eared comic book. The cover featured Zip Rideout moonwalking across a steamy crater, his rocket standing at attention in the distance.

The story was written and illustrated by Spyder Mapleson. It said so right beneath Zip’s rocket.

“I’ll give you a hint about who it is,” said Mrs. Crammond. She walked over to Martin’s desk and held up his comic book.

“Spyder Mapleson?!” gasped Martin.

“That’s right!” said Mrs. Crammond, handing back the comic book.

The class whooped while Martin happily clutched Zip’s picture to his chest.

Mrs. Crammond returned to the front of the studio.

“He’s coming Monday, and we need to get this room shipshape for his visit.”

“*Space* shipshape,” Martin called out, all smiles.

“Very good, Martin,” said Mrs. Crammond. “So today we’ll paint scenes from outer space to decorate the studio.”

They quickly set up their easels, and Martin jumped right to work with his brush. Art was his favorite class, and space exploration was his favorite subject.

He decided he would paint Zip Rideout giving his official salute. But when it came time to add Zip's badge of honor, Martin had trouble with the silver points.

I'll have to ask Spyder Mapleson how to paint realistic details, thought Martin, and I'll take really good notes so that I remember every word.

When the class was almost over, Mrs. Crammond clapped her hands. "Time to put your work up," she announced.

The students pinned their art to the walls of the studio, transforming the classroom into a space academy. Martin was pleased to see that he was the only one who had tackled Zip's portrait.

The other astronauts had painted satellites and planets with many moons.

The firefighters had featured flaming rockets and exploding suns.

The police officers had drawn intergalactic battle scenes.

The hockey players had designed protective space gear.

And the paleontologists and ballerinas had created futuristic museums and theaters filled with patrons who looked surprisingly like dinosaurs.

"Mrs. Crammond?" said Martin after surveying the room. "I think we should write Zip Rideout's loyalty pledge on the blackboard."

The class murmured their approval.

"How does it go?" she asked, picking up a piece of chalk.

The class recited the pledge while Mrs. Crammond wrote it out in her tidy teacher's handwriting.

*From star to star my ship will race,*

*The speed of light is my fast pace,*

*It's bold, uncharted worlds I'll face*

*'Cause I'm a brave cadet of space.*

Then everyone gave each other the official Zip Rideout salute.

That Saturday, Martin sat in the cool shade of his tree fort with Alex and Stuart. They had their Solar System Explorer Sets and were deciding which *Zip Rideout* show to act out.

“How about episode twenty-six: ‘Return of Crater Man’?” suggested Stuart.

Martin knew all about episode twenty-six. Zip fought off Crater Man in a shoot-out on the planet Astro. It had been scary to watch, because Martin was sure Zip would get hurt.

But Zip didn't. As usual, he was able to dart away from the blasts and still manage to capture his archenemy in an ingenious trap.

“Sounds good to me!” exclaimed Martin and Alex together.

The three put on their official Zip Rideout space goggles.

“I'll be Ground Control,” said Stuart. “Where are the walkie-talkies?”

Martin dug them out from under the old ship's wheel that his dad had bought at a yard sale. He handed one of the walkie-talkies to Stuart.

“I'll be Zip,” said Martin.

He knew Alex wouldn't mind. Alex had been Zip the last time.

“Then I'll be the King of Astro,” said Alex, agreeably enough. “And I'll help Zip free my people from Crater Man's evil grip.”

“Okay,” said Martin. “Let's take our places.”

Stuart climbed down the ladder to set up Ground Control at the base of the tree, while Zip and the King of Astro stayed up top and discussed their lines.

“Testing, testing. One, two, three. Testing,” squawked Martin’s walkie-talkie.

“Ground Control, this is Zip. Over,” said Martin in his official radio voice.

“I read you, Zip. Over.”

“Ground Control, I’m here with the King of Astro. We’re about to make a lunar landing to see if we can spot Crater Man. Over.”

“Affirmative, Zip. This is Ground Control standing by. Radio again when you’ve touched down.”

“Roger,” said Martin, very Zip-like.

Martin quickly replayed the next scene in his head. Moonwalking was going to be a blast. No wonder he wanted to be an astronaut when he grew up!

“You know what would be fun?” Alex asked in his regular voice. “If we could *really* feel what it would be like to moonwalk.”

Martin nodded and looked out the window of his tree fort. “Well, we’re high enough. We just need the bounce part.”

“Say, I have an idea. Where’s your pogo stick?” asked Alex.

“The garage,” said Martin, instantly on high alert. “Why?”

Alex was always full of harebrained ideas, like rescuing Polly, their class parakeet, from another school, bringing slime to Camp Kitchywahoo as a prank and locking his brother out of their bedroom by gluing the door shut.

“You’ll see,” said Alex, and he grabbed Martin’s walkie-talkie. “Ground Control? This is the King of Astro. Do you read me? Over.”

“I read you loud and clear. Over.”

“Astro’s orange moon has just come up on our sensors. We’re going to need our antigravity bounce device. Over.”

“Say again. Over.”

“Our antigravity bounce device. Over.”

There was a long pause, and dead air filled both walkie-talkies.

At last, Martin took pity on Stuart. He grabbed the walkie-talkie from Alex.

“My pogo stick, Stuart. It’s in the garage,” explained Martin.

“Roger,” said Ground Control. Then, forgetting to turn off his walkie-talkie, Stuart muttered, “Why didn’t they just say so?”

Alex rolled his eyes at Martin. Martin adjusted his space goggles.

A few minutes later, Stuart pushed open the trap door.

“We should switch roles soon,” he said peevishly. “I’m getting bored down there.”

“In a bit,” said Alex, taking the pogo stick from him.

Reluctantly, Stuart headed down to his post, banging the trap door shut behind him.

“Watch this,” said Alex eagerly.

He jumped on the pogo stick and began to bounce erratically around the tree fort.

“Stay clear of the window,” advised Martin. “It’s a long way down.” Something in his own voice reminded Martin of the worried tone his mom sometimes had.

“This is great,” announced Alex, ignoring Martin’s warning. He smoothed out his bounce. “I’m ... practically ... floating ... in ... space,” he said between springs.

It began to look like a lot of fun, and the cautious voice inside Martin's head faded away.

"Let me try," said Martin.

Alex bounced a few more times before surrendering the pogo stick.

During his first few tries, Martin kept falling off to avoid hitting a wall or getting too close to the window. It was dizzying being so high up and in such a tight space. He decided to take smaller bounces to get better control.

"Look at me!" exclaimed Martin.

*Bounce. Bounce.*

"I'm moonwalking! Just like Zip!"

It was then that Stuart, a look of curiosity on his face, pushed the trap door wide open.

"What's going on?" he demanded. But he barely finished his question because, at that exact moment, Martin bounced past Stuart and rocketed through the open trap door.

Later, Alex and Stuart would say it all happened so quickly.

But not Martin.

As he plunged down, Martin saw everything in exquisite detail. Stuart, whose mouth was shaped like the capital letter O. The tree fort ladder flickering by like a picket fence. A squirrel staring quizzically and chattering at him to slow down. And the lawn springing up to meet him.

Then the pogo stick landed. It stayed put, but Martin kept going. He launched back into the air, passed that same chattering squirrel, then smashed high up against the tree.

Martin slid down the rough bark until he came to rest in a soft puddle position at the base of the trunk.

Alex and Stuart scrambled down the ladder.

“Martin! Martin! Are you okay?” they called.

Martin didn’t move. He sat, woozy and confused.

“Get up! Get up!” Alex ordered. “My dad always makes me do that right away to make sure nothing’s broken.”

But Martin did not get up. His ears were ringing, and even though Alex was talking right to Martin’s face, his words sounded far, far away. Martin peeled off his Zip Rideout goggles.

“He’s bleeding,” said Stuart, wringing his hands and stepping back behind Alex.

“Where?” asked Alex.

Stuart pointed to the side of Martin’s head precisely where Martin felt burning. It also throbbed every time his heart beat.

“Holy cow!” said Alex.

Martin reached up and gingerly touched the side of his head. It felt warm and sticky. He looked at his fingertips.

Blood.

The ground flew up to grab him, but Alex lunged forward to hold Martin steady against the tree trunk.

“H-how bad is it?” Martin asked tentatively, not sure if he really wanted to know. He half-turned his head so his friends could take a better look.

Alex and Stuart leaned in to investigate, then Stuart quickly pulled back.



“What?!” Martin demanded, alarmed by Stuart’s reaction.

His friends glanced at each other with big eyes. It was Stuart who finally spoke.

“You’re bleeding behind the flappity part of your ear,” he reported.

“The what?” Martin asked weakly. The ground wobbled again.

“Behind your ear flap,” Alex confirmed. “Someone should look at that.”

Stuart nodded vigorously.

Now the side of Martin’s head throbbed even more. Everything became swirly again. Martin started to shake.

“I’ll go get your mom,” offered Stuart, and he dashed across the lawn before Martin could protest.

Alex stayed with Martin. There followed a brief but tense silence.

“Holy cow! You should have seen yourself,” Alex finally blurted out. “One minute you’re moonwalking, and the next minute — *whoosh* — you’ve gone through a wormhole in space!”

Martin said nothing. It took great effort not to throw up.

“And look at this,” said Alex, scrambling to his feet and scooting over to where the pogo stick had speared the ground. It was still standing at a rakish angle.

“I can’t even pull this out,” he said, yanking it dramatically with both hands. He looked to Martin for approval, but was interrupted by a shout.

“Martin!”

Martin looked up at the sound of his mom’s voice as she sprinted across the yard, then hunkered down in front of him.

“Let me see,” she said softly, turning Martin’s head so that the mashed side faced her. “Oh, my.” She gently prodded his ear flap. “You boys wait with Martin. I’ll get the first aid kit.”

In a flash, she was gone. Alex turned to Stuart and started up again.

“Did you see Martin shoot through the trap door? It was like he rocketed through a wormhole. Like episode seven, when Zip travels from the desert planet of Bleeker to one of Astro’s moons.” He wheeled to face Martin. “No kidding, Martin. You were moving at the speed of light! Just like Zip Rideout!!”

Martin had always wanted to be just like his space hero, so Alex’s words should have thrilled him. But they didn’t.

Instead, Martin tried to remember an episode where Spyder Mapleson showed Zip in a lot of pain. Real pain. With blood. None came to mind. Not even the shoot-out scene with Crater Man. It was then that Martin realized he had been deceived.

“I don’t want to be an astronaut anymore,” Martin announced, Spyder Mapleson’s betrayal exploding inside him.

His friends gasped.

“That’s crazy,” said Alex.

“Crazy?” repeated Martin. “No. Crazy is bouncing around on a pogo stick in a tree fort.”

Alex scuffed at the ground.

“What about exploring bold, uncharted worlds?” asked Stuart.

“What do *you* know about exploring bold, uncharted worlds?” snapped Martin.

“*You* chose Ground Control.”

“Hang on!” Stuart replied in a hurt voice. “I said I was bored and wanted to switch. Remember?”

“Want to switch with me now?” asked Martin. He turned the throbbing side of his head to Stuart for full effect.

To Martin’s satisfaction, Stuart quickly looked away.

Suddenly, Martin’s mom was gently pressing a cool cloth to his head. But Martin couldn’t remember how she got there. And he didn’t remember getting into the van or how Alex and Stuart came to be riding in the backseat.

“Almost there,” said Martin’s mom.

“Almost where?” asked Martin.

“The hospital,” said his mom, glancing at him.

The hospital? Cripes! Martin had never been to one before. But from what he had heard from Alex, who had been there plenty of times, it didn’t sound like much fun.

“Why can’t I just lie down in my room for a bit?” he asked feebly.

“This is an emergency, Martin,” said his mom. She glanced at him again, this time with alarm. “I already explained this when we were helping you into the van.”

Martin gave her a blank stare.

“We’re *definitely* going to the hospital,” she muttered, pushing harder on the gas pedal.

Looking back, Martin remembered bits and pieces about the hospital. Squeaky linoleum floors and voices calling over loudspeakers. Ceiling lights so bright there were no shadows in the room. And being wheeled around on a hard cot with a pillow that made crinkle sounds beneath his head.

Alex and Stuart had to wait in the lobby while Martin got stitches behind his ear, but Martin's mom never left his side.

The next thing Martin knew, his mom was tucking him in on the sofa at home. She had even brought down Admiral, Martin's furry stuffed turtle, and the rocket-covered blanket from his bed.

"Want to watch some television?" she asked kindly. "I think Zip's on."

This did not buoy Martin's spirits. He was still angry at Spyder Mapleson because of Zip's accident-free record.

Martin shook his head "no," but the movement caused him sudden jabbing pains. He winced, and his mom nodded sympathetically. She got him some apple juice and a pill for the pain.

"You'll be shipshape in no time," she assured him as he swallowed it.

Martin wasn't so certain. For as long as he could remember, Martin had believed in Zip. And every night he had dreamed of exploring bold, uncharted worlds. Now he knew better.

"Bought you a comic book, Sport," said Martin's dad later that day. "The newest *Zip Rideout!*"

"Thanks, Dad," Martin managed as he stared at yet another annoyingly triumphant cover.

Moonwalking. Rescue missions. *Shoot-outs!* Why, an astronaut was *bound* to get hurt. But as Martin flipped through the pages, he reaffirmed that there were no accidents or hospital scenes or blood in any of Spyder Mapleson's stories.

All lies, thought Martin bitterly.

He tossed the comic book down in disgust, then rolled over onto his non-mashed side. Moving his head still hurt.

“Ow! Ow! Ow!” he complained, Zip’s infuriating front-cover smile mocking him from the floor.

On Sunday, Martin mostly slept, but by Monday morning he was up and about.

“Are you sure you feel well enough to go to school, Sport?” asked his dad at breakfast. “The doctor said you could stay home for another day.”

“Spyder Mapleson’s coming for a visit,” explained Martin’s mom as she buttered some toast. “Martin wouldn’t miss him for the world.”

Martin said nothing. He poured his usual bowl of Zip Rideout Space Flakes, but he turned the box so he wouldn’t have to look at the illustration of Zip’s rocket.

It was then that Martin remembered he had wanted to ask Spyder Mapleson about how to paint realistic details.

Forget that, thought Martin. *Nothing* about Spyder Mapleson’s illustrations was real. With angry determination, he began to develop a new line of questioning.

When Martin arrived at school, his bandages caused quite a sensation, and he had to explain the accident about a hundred times.

Alex kept trying to insert space hero details like moonwalking and wormholes into Martin’s version of the event, but Martin wouldn’t have any of it.

“I’m not like Zip,” he insisted, head still slightly throbbing. “And I don’t want to be.”

He repeated this until art class, when he spotted Spyder Mapleson sitting beside Mrs. Crammond's desk. A box near the illustrator's feet had part of the solar system sticking out of it.

"Good morning," said Mrs. Crammond warmly after all of Martin's classmates had settled down. "As you know, we have a very special visitor today. Please welcome Spyder Mapleson."

The class clapped vigorously as their guest stood. He had very bushy eyebrows and wore a black Zip Rideout t-shirt. He gave them the official Zip Rideout salute.

Everyone jumped up and saluted back. Martin grudgingly joined in. Then he noticed that one of the planets orbiting out of Spyder Mapleson's box was Pluto.

That's not even a planet anymore, thought Martin in disgust as he sat back down.

Spyder Mapleson launched into his presentation. He talked about his artwork and where he got his ideas from. As he did, he pulled out the old-fashioned solar system and other space props from his box. Then he taped a large sheet of paper to the wall and showed them how to draw Zip Rideout step by step.

"And this is how I handle my ink brush to add details, like the star-shaped zipper pull and the badge of honor," explained Spyder, putting the finishing touches on Zip's jacket.

This was exactly the kind of information Martin had once hoped for.

"Aaaaaah!" said the class, much to Martin's annoyance.

Martin did not take notes.

"Any questions?" asked Spyder.

Hands shot up.

The astronauts were curious about why Astro's moon was orange. The firefighters were interested in Zip's most memorable explosion. The police officers wanted to find out if laser guns made sounds in space. The hockey players asked if Zip's space suit protected him from flying debris. And the paleontologists and ballerinas wondered if Zip went to museums and theaters on his days off.

Martin rolled his eyes at all of Spyder Mapleson's answers.

"We have time for one more question," said Mrs. Crammond.

Martin raised his hand.

"My name is Martin, and I have a question," he said with the deadly aim of an intergalactic missile. "How come you never show pictures of accidents or blood or pain when Zip is exploring bold, uncharted worlds?"

"Good question, Martin," said Spyder. "But before I answer, let me ask you this. Would you *want* to see pictures of accidents or blood or your space hero in pain?"

Martin didn't take long to answer. "No," he said as he touched his bandages.

The class murmured in agreement, glancing at Martin with sympathetic eyes.

"Precisely," said Spyder. "And that's one of the best things about being an illustrator. Sure, Zip gets to explore bold, uncharted worlds. But I get to *create* those worlds and Zip's space adventures. There's *nothing* more exciting than that!"

The class mulled this over.

Martin, too.

Like a misfired rocket booster, Martin's anger fizzled to nothing.

"Say, I have an idea for a world that Zip could explore," said Martin.

"You do?" said Spyder. "Tell us."

“How about a planet where people live in tree forts?” suggested Martin.

“I like it,” said Spyder, raising a bushy eyebrow in delight. He picked up his ink brush and began to sketch out the scene.

“And maybe they could get around on pogo sticks,” Martin called out.

Spyder drew that, too.

“I think we should call them Martinians,” said Spyder, adding the final details.

When he completed the drawing, he rolled it up and gave it to Martin along with the official Zip Rideout salute.

Martin saluted back.

Spyder Mapleson’s visit ended, and Mrs. Crammond escorted him to the school’s front door. Everyone quickly turned to Martin.

“Holy cow, Martin!” exclaimed Alex. “You think just like Spyder!”

“And I thought only astronauts got worlds named after them,” added Stuart, fully impressed.

Martin beamed. He leapt up from his desk and raced over to his portrait of Zip, eager to add silver points, now that he knew how.

For although Martin hadn’t taken any notes, he remembered every word.