

## Welcome to Zero Gravity

When Mars dreamed of traveling to distant planets, vomit wasn't the first thing that came to mind. But here he was hurtling through space on the Pruitt 3, hurling into a barf bag.

"Mars, say goodbye to Earth! You are about to go on the adventure of your life!" crowed Oliver Pruitt, the billion- aire inventor who had orchestrated this journey on his own spaceship. Of course, he wasn't actually in the cock- pit. Only a hologram version of him stood there. But that didn't stop the man from gushing virtually from his control center millions of miles away. "Go on, float around," Oliver called out as Mars turned green. "Welcome to zero gravity!"

Just a few minutes ago, after leaving Earth, Mars had unbuckled his harness and felt himself free-floating inside the walls of the cockpit, somersaulting and pinwheeling his way through the cabin. First he was right side up, then he was upside down until his limbs felt like clouds, and the universe zoomed by outside in a veil of darkness. Was this really happening to him? Was he really on a spaceship headed to the planet Mars?

Meanwhile, Oliver Pruitt watched, looking sharp in his maroon space suit. Mars wasn't even sure when Oliver had changed. Back on Earth, he had appeared to Mars and his friends in a muted white flight suit. Now Mars's friends and his mom were left behind, maybe forever. It had been twelve minutes since liftoff, but to Mars, it felt like a lifetime. He needed to know where Aurora was, and why Oliver had led him to outer space, far from everyone Mars loved.

But first Mars had other problems. He heaved into the paper bag.

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"I think I just barfed up a lung," he said weakly. "Nothing like traveling through space for the first time! What you're feeling, Mars, is motion sickness as your body adjusts to weightlessness. But don't worry. You'll get used to it in no time. And then the fun really begins!" The door to the cockpit burst open. "Mr. Pruitt, we've got a problem," announced a girl in an orange flight suit who had tumbled into the room. She was small-boned with a slightly upturned nose and a cascade of dark brown curls floating around her square face.

Mars stared in disbelief. "You're Lost in London! I mean, you're Julia!" He recognized her immediately from the missing-children flyers he and his friends had found back in Port Elizabeth. But where had she come from? Had she been on the spacecraft the entire time? "When did you get here?" he asked.

Julia rolled her eyes at him but her voice was gentle. "Mars, I didn't get here, I've been here. But honestly, I don't have time to explain when we're in an emergency. Mr. Pruitt, I need to know if—" But hologram Oliver Pruitt was fading away. Julia's eyebrows knitted together. "Mr. Pruitt!" she repeated crossly.

"Sorry, Julia! Have to run! But it sounds like you've got it under control!" Oliver Pruitt was growing fainter and fainter until he was just a shimmer. "Wait! Don't go!" Mars cried out. "You need to answer my questions. Where's Aurora? What's going to happen to my friends and my mom? And why did you lie to me? Why did you make us go through all of that on Earth?" "That's a lot of questions," Oliver said wryly. "I need to know!" "I had to make sure you were ready for the Red Planet." Oliver now was barely an outline. "Wait until you get here. The Colony will blow your mind!" "Colony?" Mars repeated. "Is that where Aurora is?"

"There's so much to tell you, Mars. About why I chose you for the mission. Because you are—" The spaceship lurched horribly. "WARNING: BREACH IMMINENT IN SECTOR C." The announcement rang across the speakers, followed by an alarm. "Mr. Pruitt!" Julia said again, more urgently. But Oliver Pruitt had vanished from the cockpit. "Oh, great! Just what we need. A commander-in-chief who's MIA." "WARNING: BREACH IMMINENT IN SECTOR C."

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The alarm sounded again, and Mars felt like his life was repeating. Wasn't it just a few weeks ago that he and Caddie were hiding out in a janitor closet at school during a Code Red? Were alarms going to follow him his whole life-even in space? "Is that warning serious?" Mars asked nervously. "What does it mean?" Julia had floated to an intercom mounted on the wall and now said loudly into the mic, "We need you on the flight deck-NOW!"

Then she turned to Mars. "It means that if we don't do something about that hole in Sector C, we're going to burn up like a marshmallow on an open flame. Which is what I was trying to tell Oliver Pruitt before he vanished on us." "WARNING: CATASTROPHIC BREACH IN SECTOR C. CATASTROPHIC BREACH IN SECTOR C. ALL SYSTEMS DISENGAGE IN THREE MINUTES." "Does that mean we're going to die?" Mars felt his heart thud. Until now it had seemed like things were going well enough. Sure, he'd thought Pruitt Prep was a normal school on Gale Island, until he found out that it was also a spacecraft heading to Mars.

And sure, Oliver had tricked him into coming on board, but Mars hadn't expected to die on the man's watch. Now Oliver was gone. And catastrophe was around the corner. "It means we have to handle this problem ourselves," Julia said. "That means you, Mars." "But I d-don't-" Mars stuttered in a panic. "I've never been on a spaceship, and I never-" Julia steeled herself.

"I get it. This is all new for you. It's natural to freak out. But I need you to calm down so you can help us not die. You think you can handle that?" Behind Julia, a panel slid open. A teenage guy in a gray flight suit floated in. His brown eyes were wide-spaced and intelligent, and he looked like he hadn't had a haircut in weeks. "Places, everybody," he said easily. "These inter- planetary space shuttles don't fly themselves." Mars stared at him, agog. Who else was on board this spaceship?