

The Iron Heart of Mars

R. J. Harbor



The Space Bound Series
www.bakkenbooks.com

The Iron Heart of Mars by R. J. Harbor

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To my kids,

*Chase your dreams fearlessly. Your
potential knows no bounds, and I'll
always be here cheering you on.*

THE SPACE BOUND COLLECTION

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High-Speed Crash

The night sky is my favorite place. The stars feel closer than ever. My spaceship rattles, and I grip the dash.

“Pull up, Ivory!” I yell to my ten-year-old sister. *The ship is rocking so hard! I can barely see straight.*

“What do you think I’m doing? Making toast?” she shouts. “Oh, no!”

I twist in my seat to look. She’s holding the thruster in one hand. Its wires are dangling. Her eyes are wide in the moonlight. “Now we are toast!” I yell.

With a final shudder, the ship splits in half! We shout as we freefall. When I finally hit the ground, I groan.



Rubbing my head, I look at Echo, the robot I built. So far, he is my best robot. Echo does have some defects and glitches.

I am only twelve, but one day I expect to have him built to perfection. One thing is for sure, he is much better than our cardboard ship!

“Mission failed, earthlings,” Echo says. His voice sounds a little robotic. He rolls forward on his single wheel. The structure of his metal shell allows him to move and bend easily. Rims of light shine

from beneath each piece of his shell. Right now, he is flashing a blue color instead of his usual yellow.

“I will get to space someday,” I vow, staring up at the sky.

“Yeah, Monty. I don’t want to fall all the way from space,” Ivory says.

“You can’t fall in space. With no gravity, you float,” I say.

“Floating sounds better.” She is holding her elbow as she gets to her feet.

“It is 79 degees Fahrenheit and cloudy in Floating Rocks, Utah,” Echo reports.

“Echo, we don’t care about the weather in Utah!” I search the sky. “I would rather know what the weather is on Mars!” *I wish I could fix that glitch!*

Echo hums, then says, “It is -125 degrees Fahrenheit with a sandstorm.”

“Monty, Ivory!” a voice in the distance calls.

“The *Mother-Ship* is calling.” Echo flashes a happy orange color. I think he loves Mom as much as Ivory and I do.

I look him over. With large, round, glowing eyes, he is always recording what is happening. He holds the crumpled box in his two C-shaped hands. Programming those hands had taken forever! At first, he smashed everything he touched. Now, he can pick up an egg without breaking it! I'm most proud of his balance system. I spent weeks fine-tuning it.

"Echo, do you think you could survive on Mars?" I ask.

He hums again, flashing purple this time. "Yes, I am like the Mars Exploration Rover called *Spirit*. Six rovers have visited Mars. Echo would like to be number seven. I could search for signs of life like they have."

"Did you know the number six is afraid of the number seven?" Ivory asks. She is still picking sticks and dirt from her brunette hair.

"Afraid?" Echo asks.

"Yes, because *seven ate nine!*" She giggles at her joke.

Echo squints his eyes. I know he wants to learn what a joke is.

“Yes, Echo, that is a joke,” I add.

“*Seven, eight, nine?* This is funny?” Echo asks.

“Monty! Ivory!” Mom calls again.

“Race you!” Ivory shouts, running toward home.

“No fair!” I race after her. We run down the path toward the warm lights of home. I count the seconds: “Five... six...”

Just like always, Echo zooms past us. *He always beats us home!*

Solar Hopscotch

I hurry down the school hall to favorite class, science! Mr. Carter is the best!

I sit in the closest open seat to the front, take out my books, and slide my backpack under my desk. I don't want to miss anything in science!

"Who can tell me what this is?" Mr. Carter asks, holding a model.

"It's the solar system!" I nearly shout. *I didn't know we were learning about space today!* Mr. Carter spins the model, making the planets move around the Sun.

Something smacks the back of my head. A small wad of paper rolls down the aisle toward Mr. Carter. He frowns.

I hear a snicker from the back of the room. *It's Mac again. I wish he was in a different class.*

I spot the top of Echo's head as he peeks in the window. His eyes narrow as he stares at Mac. His lights are glowing red—his angry color.

Echo is not allowed in school. I can't get him to stop answering every question!

"Mac, do that again, and you will see some detention time," Mr. Carter warns.

He taps the planet closest to the Sun. "What planet is this?" he asks.

"Pluto," I hear Mac answer.

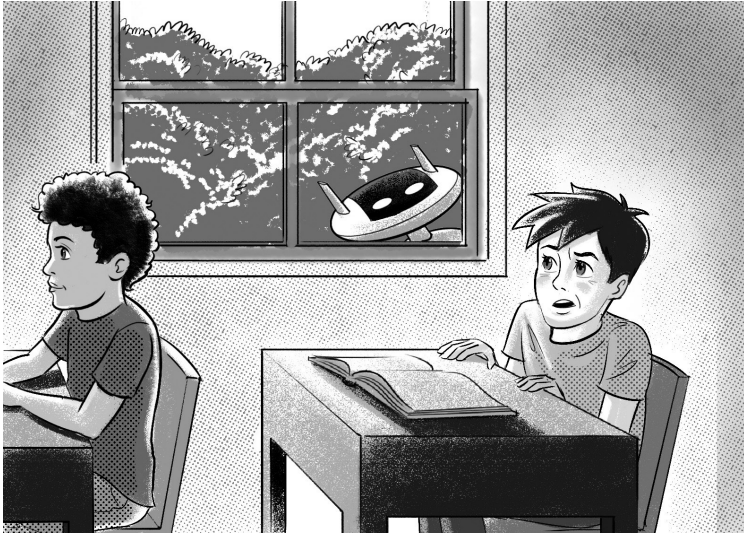
"Mercury!" I hear Echo's voice from outside.

I sink lower in my seat, hoping Mr. Carter did not hear Echo. Then I shake my head. *Pluto is not actually a planet; it's called a dwarf planet.*

"Wrong answer, Mac. There will be a test on the solar system later this week. What is the name of this one?" Mr. Carter points to another.

Echo and I mutter, "Mars."

"Earth!" Mac laughs at his answer.



Why can't he be serious about space? Why does he have to make jokes about it?

“If this was Earth,” Mr. Carter taps the planet, “life would be impossible. This is Mars. The red planet is the fourth one from the Sun. Does anyone know how big Mars is compared to Earth?”

““Mars is .53 times the size of Earth,” Echo says from outside. His voice is even louder this time!

If Echo doesn't stop answering, we are both going to get in trouble.

“Who said that?” asked Mr. Carter.

My face feels hot. “Umm...about half the size of Earth,” I say with a nervous laugh.

“Who said that?” asked Mr. Carter.

I smile nervously as the teacher looks at me again. *Echo and I need to have another talk!* My classes on the second floor are fine. But he always finds me in classes on the first floor.

By the time school is out, all I can think about is being in space! My all-time hero is Ryker Jackson. He made more trips into space than any other astronaut in history! I look at the sky, wondering about his disappearance ten years ago. No one has heard from him since. I have read every article ever written about him and I even have his biography!

As I run down the sidewalk, I hop on the first square with one foot and call out, “Mercury!”

I jump with two feet on the next. “Venus!”

I have one foot on the next square, but Echo surprises me, “Earth!”

I teeter with one foot still on Earth. “Echo, you nearly got us in big trouble.”

He slumps, flashing blue. “Echo misses Monty.”

I sigh, then leap forward. “Mars! Having two feet on Mars would be the best thing ever!”

“Tag, you’re it!” Ivory yells from behind, tapping my arm.

I look at Echo. He is still blue as he tries to hopscotch like I did. But he only has one wheel. His blue shade grows deeper.

I feel bad for him; after all, he is sort of my best friend.

“Come on, Echo. We can catch her together!”

“Together?” He lights up bright orange.

My backpack flops around on my back as we race after Ivory. She veers into a patch of woods behind school where we’ve never played before.

“Hurry!” I cry. Echo zooms past me into the dark woods.

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Discovery!

I skid to a stop at the edge of the trees. “Ivory? Echo?”

Only an odd silence greets me. I look over my shoulder, muttering to myself, “If you can’t face your fear here on Earth, how will you be brave enough to travel in space? How will you be like your hero, Ryker Jackson, if you can’t follow your sister into the woods?”

I tighten my fists and take a step into the dark woods. My stomach feels like I ate some Brussels sprouts. I swallow hard as I pass huge trees.

“Ivory?” I whisper. I notice it doesn’t seem so dark up ahead. I hurry toward the light.

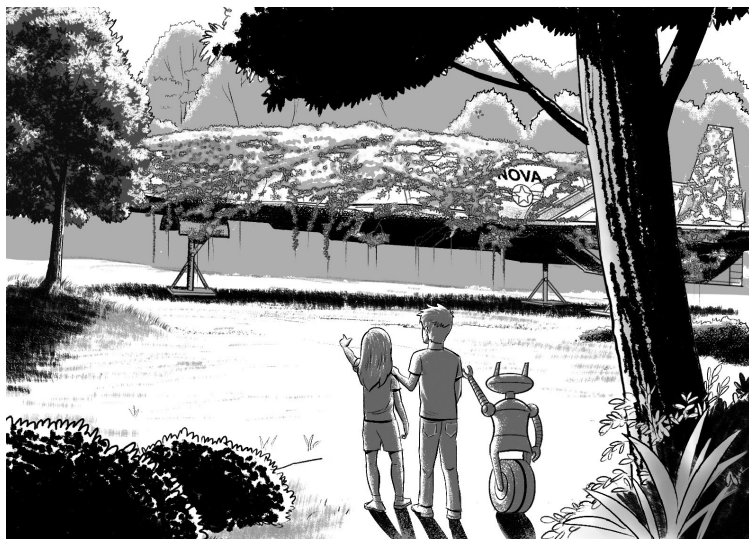
“Found you!” I cry in relief when I see Ivory

with Echo. They don't respond. Their eyes are fixed on a small clearing in the woods.

I reach out and touch Ivory. "Tagged you."

Her only response is to point at the clearing. I don't see anything, but Echo is lime green. I have never seen him turn this color before. Ivory is still pointing at the meadow. Staring at the meadow, I see a few small trees and lots of tall grass. "What exactly do you want me to see? All I see..."

Echo then points with his C-shaped hand. Only



then do I see the outline of what looks like a huge spaceship! Vines cover all but one silvery-white wingtip. My knees tremble. *I'm standing next to a spaceship!*

“I think this should be my birthday present,” Ivory states. *She won't let me forget her birthday is only four days away!*

“No way! We don't even know who owns it!”

“Maybe we can get inside!” she says. Ivory is already running forward.

“Wait!” I say, but my heart pulls me forward too. I can barely breathe as I walk under the wing. Three sturdy legs hold up the ship. I pull off some vines. *I can see my reflection in the ship's wide belly.*

Echo whistles, spinning in circles under the ship. “Nice! Nice ship!”

He never repeats himself! Echo's strange lime-green color glows brighter. I walk to the rear of the ship and stare up at four huge engines! My heart beats faster as I pull away some vines. My mouth drops wide open.

“This is a *real* spaceship!” The engines are set on pivots. They can turn in any direction. I know this craft would be *super-fast!*

“I can’t find a way inside!” Ivory stomps her foot. I notice how tiny she looks standing next to the ship.

“There! I see an airlock!” I point up at a sealed door on the side of the ship.

“I see two more on this side!” she cries. “We need a ladder.”

I feel like this is a dream. *I am standing in the shadow of a spacecraft!* Echo is making clicking sounds and whistling. He zips from one support leg to the other.

“Found it,” he reports. He pushes a button.

I hear a soft, hissing sound. A section of the belly lowers! A long set of stairs begins to lower with a whirring sound! I gasp, looking up inside of the ship!

“Me first!” Ivory calls, racing for the stairs.

“IVORY!” I shout, “Stop!”

She is already rushing up the stairs and quickly disappears inside of the ship.

Echo and I reach the stairs at the same time. As he grasps the handrail, a flash of light surges up his metal shell.

“Echo, what was that?”

He does not answer. Instead, he watches as the stairs flatten into a ramp!

“Oooooo Ooooooo,” he says happily. His lime-green color glows even brighter as he rolls up the ramp.

I stare, knowing my life will never be the same if I take the next step. I step on the ramp and follow Echo. *A spaceship!*