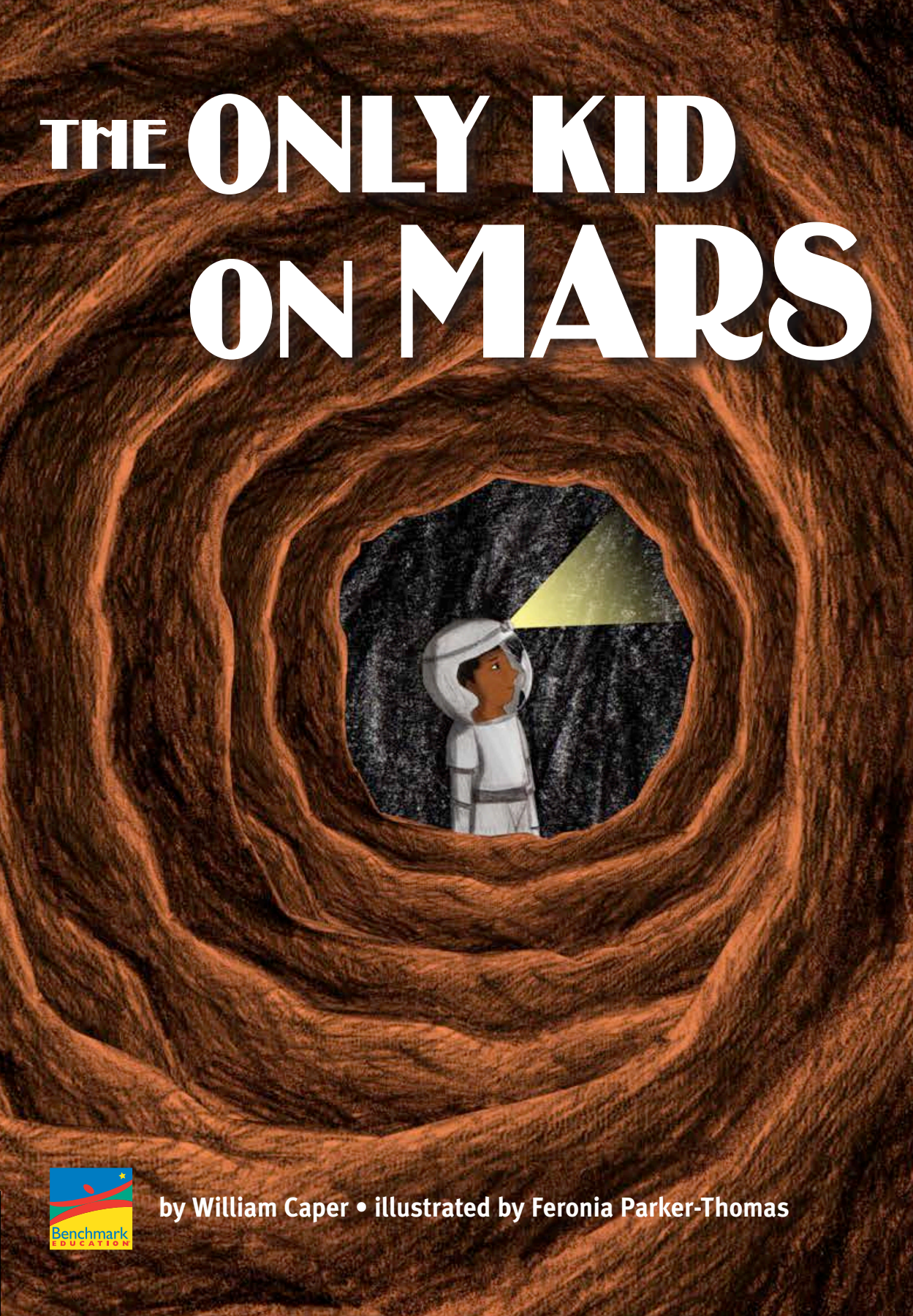
THE ONLY KID ON MARS



by William Caper • illustrated by Feronia Parker-Thomas

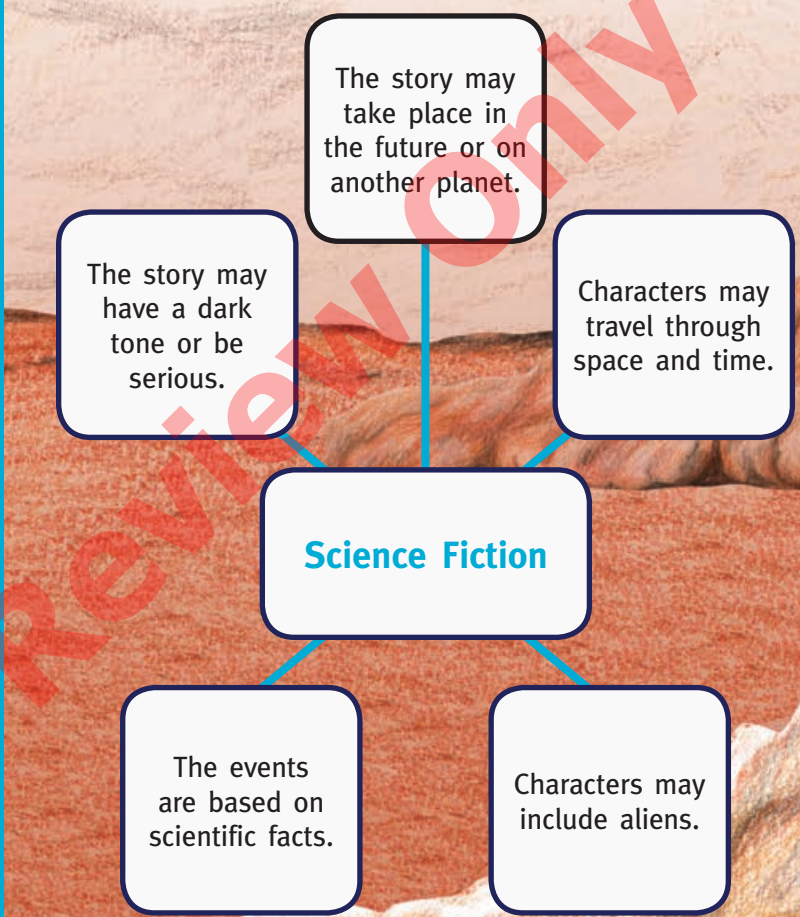
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NOW I AM A MARTIAN

"Marcus, no," came his father's voice through the bedroom speaker. "You are not to come to the surface of Mars."

"We've made a family decision." Now Marcus could hear his mother's voice come through his bedroom speaker.

His parents had a reason, of course. A dust storm had been blowing on Mars for days.

"But …" Marcus stammered. Marcus wanted to be among the **colonists** cleaning the equipment on the surface. No one knew how badly the equipment might be covered in dust. Too much dust could stop their equipment from working.

"Marcus, this conversation is over," his father said. "Instead, we'd like you to check the air seals in the colony's underground structures."

Marcus glared at his silver space suit, hanging from a hook on his bedroom door. He needed it to go anywhere on Mars. But he wasn't really allowed to go anywhere.

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Marcus slowly put on his space suit. He wished it didn't take so much work! But it provided oxygen, which he needed if he was going to walk the underground tunnels. Also, he needed space boots to keep him on the ground because Mars had about one-third the **gravity** of Earth. Living on Mars was an adventure, but it was also a constant **challenge**.



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"Fine," Marcus said into the headset in his space helmet.

Marcus was bored and lonely. He was the only kid on Mars. The colony was the first one of its type. The government only wanted adults in the first colony. But his mother and father were key scientists. So, an exception was made for Marcus.

He liked his new life, but he also missed his favorite activity—fishing. That was out of the question, because there were no ponds or streams on Mars. As a matter of fact, there were no bodies of water at all.

"I just wish there was another kid to help me," Marcus said. He heard static in his headset. The dust must be interfering with the communication system.

Marcus continued down the tunnel. Every **pod** had to be securely sealed to keep oxygen inside the pod. For Earth folk on Mars, no oxygen meant no life.

Marcus carefully checked the seals on each pod. He checked the **dorms** where people slept and the meeting area. He also checked the laboratory where his mother and father ran tests on Mars's soil, rocks, air, and water.

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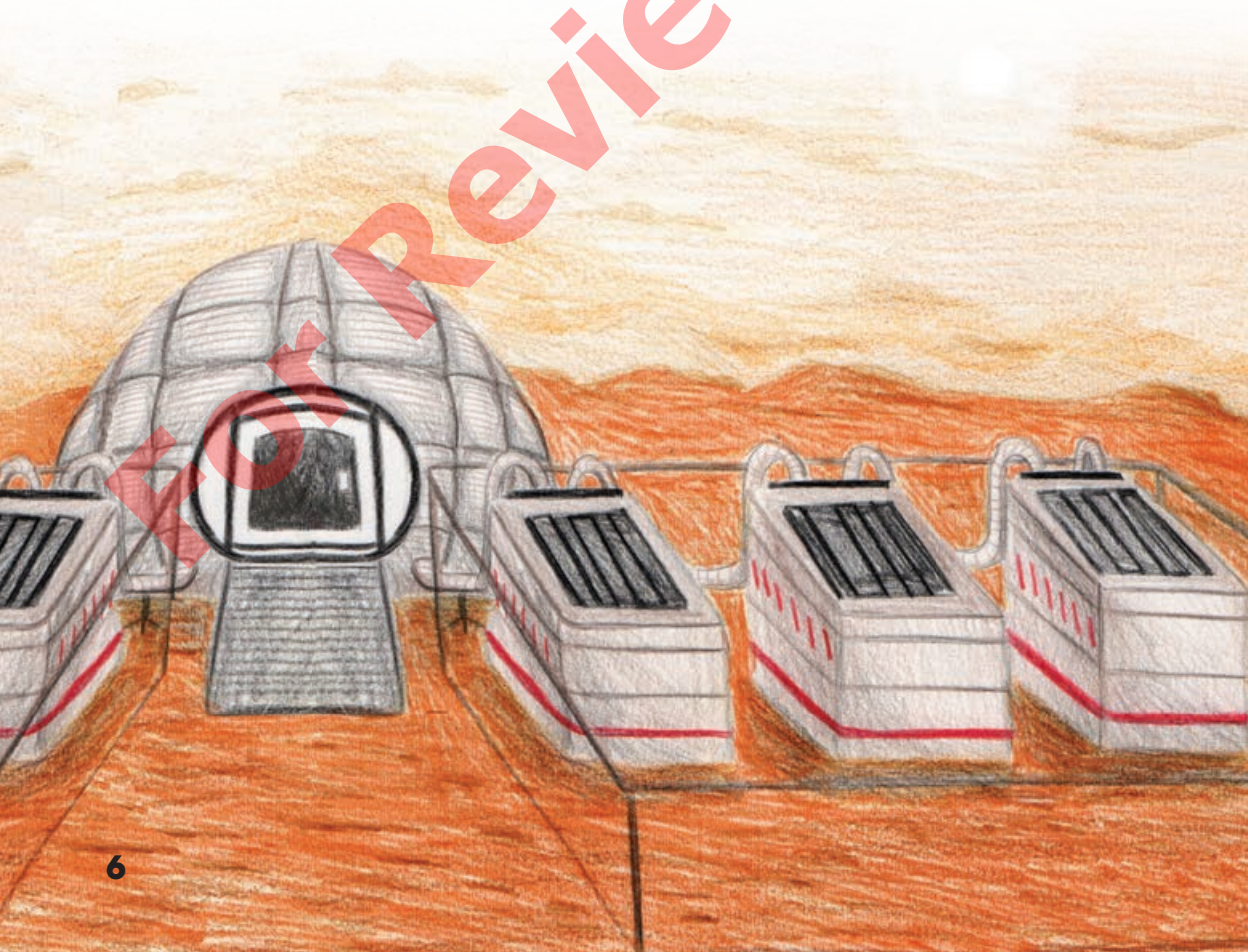
He was especially thorough when he checked the **greenhouse** where Earth crops were grown. If there was a leak in a pod, the pod could be sealed off. But the crops in the greenhouse needed constant oxygen and water. Otherwise, the crops would die. If that happened, the colonists would have only the food they'd stored.



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Marcus thought about this strange new life on Mars. Small dust storms happened often. But this last storm was huge. It was one of the biggest dust storms to happen on Mars in years.

Since there were no lakes or rivers on Mars, the colonists had to get their water in creative ways. They got it through an extraction process that pulled **water vapor** from the air. The water-extraction equipment was on the surface, and now they had to be sure it wasn't damaged by the storm.



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Marcus peered up at the immense ceiling that arched over the tube. The tube's walls were not smooth. They were ragged and uneven. They had been created on Mars from lava. At one point in the distant past, lava had flowed underground, leaving behind these convenient tunnels.

Finding all the seals good, Marcus started to walk back to his family's pod. Something caught his eye. *What was that at the far end of the tube?* He saw a blue-white sparkle. It reminded him of sunlight on a lake when he was fishing.

He wondered if there was a small hole in the tube wall. But there couldn't be. The colonists had explored every tube and tunnel while building the colony. There was not supposed to be a hole, a crack, or an opening anywhere.

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What could that glint be from? Marcus decided to take a closer look.

The walls of the tunnel were dark brown and black. They were rough to the touch and had tiny bumps left by bubbles of gas. Marcus picked up a rock from the floor of the tunnel. Lava rocks looked heavy, but they were actually surprisingly light.

Marcus reached the end of the tube. There really was a small opening in the rock wall. It was about four feet up off the ground. Beneath it were newly fallen rocks. Perhaps the storm shook those rocks loose, creating this crack.



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Marcus slipped his hand into the crack. Where the rocky wall ended, he felt something cold and flat. He bent over and looked into the crack. The headlamp on his helmet stabbed through the darkness on the other side. There seemed to be a bluish light. *What might that be?*

Before Marcus had time to think about it, he heard his mother's voice over his headset.

"Marcus, I want you to return immediately."

He turned around and headed back. All thoughts of the bluish light were gone. Because as soon as he heard his mother's voice, Marcus knew something was wrong.



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