



Look out for:

The Friendly Firecat

The Helpful Hootpuff



The Runaway Rumblebear



ILLUSTRATED BY
SOPHY
WILLIAMS

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★ • Chapter One ★

• The Vanishing Apples •

Charlie looked up at the tall white tree. Its top branches were bowed down with sparkly blue shimmer-apples.

“Come on, Random,” she called out. “Let’s get picking!”

But Random the robot wasn’t paying any attention.

His ball-shaped body floated above the ground. His metal arms were stretched out wide and his silver eyes flashed with

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Random came to a stop, floating upside down. “Oops,” he said.

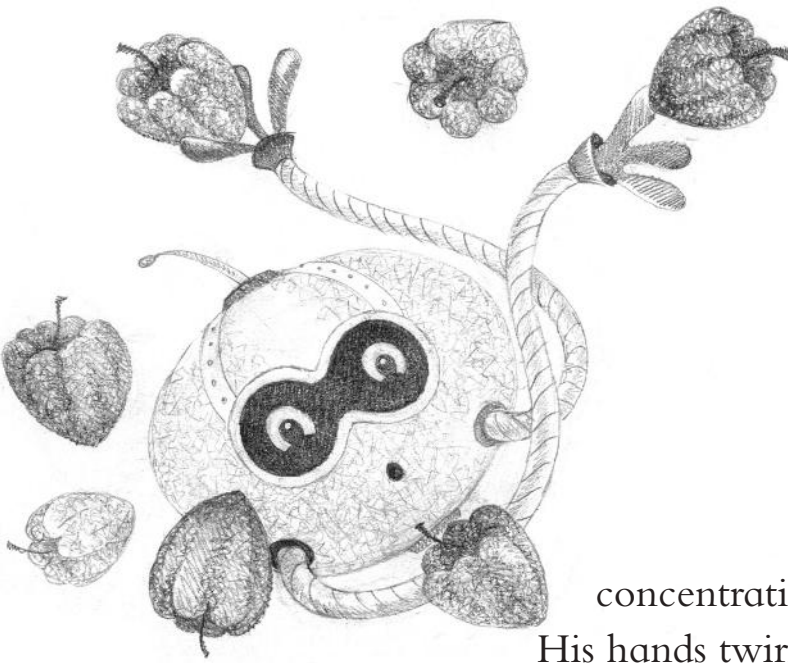
Charlie laughed. Random was her best friend but sometimes his wiring could be a little wonky. “You know you shouldn’t play with your food!” she said.

The robot righted himself and looked at Charlie sheepishly. “They’d already fallen from the tree,” he said. “And I really thought I could do it.”

“I know,” Charlie said kindly. “But we can’t afford to waste anything since those crops went missing.”

Three times in the past week, the contents of an entire storage barn had vanished. Not a berry, a bean, or an ear of corn had been left behind.

A short time ago, it wouldn’t have mattered. The people of First Landing had brought their Make-o-Mat machine with them from Earth. It could create any kind



concentration.
His hands twirled
as five shimmer-apples bounced
between them.

Charlie grinned. “That’s very clever,” she said. “But we’re here to pick the apples, Random. Not juggle them.”

Random tried to stop juggling, but the apples were flying too fast for him. His arms began to whirl madly and his body spun like a top.

Finally the apples went flying and splatted to the ground.

of food they wanted, from comet-candy to Martian meatballs.

But the machine had broken down months ago, and the next repair ship wouldn't arrive on Vela for a long time. So for now they had to rely on whatever food they could forage or grow themselves in the soil of their new home.

Luckily there were lots of plants on Vela that were good for humans to eat. It was one of the reasons they'd chosen this planet in the first place. Also, they had special super-grow powder to make sure the plants grew faster. But it was still hard work making sure everyone was fed.

And now someone – or *something* – was stealing their crops!

There was a sudden loud rustle and Random whirled around. Charlie followed his gaze and – just for a moment – she thought she saw the grass of the

orchard waving, as though something had just vanished into the undergrowth.

“Did you hear that?” she asked Random.

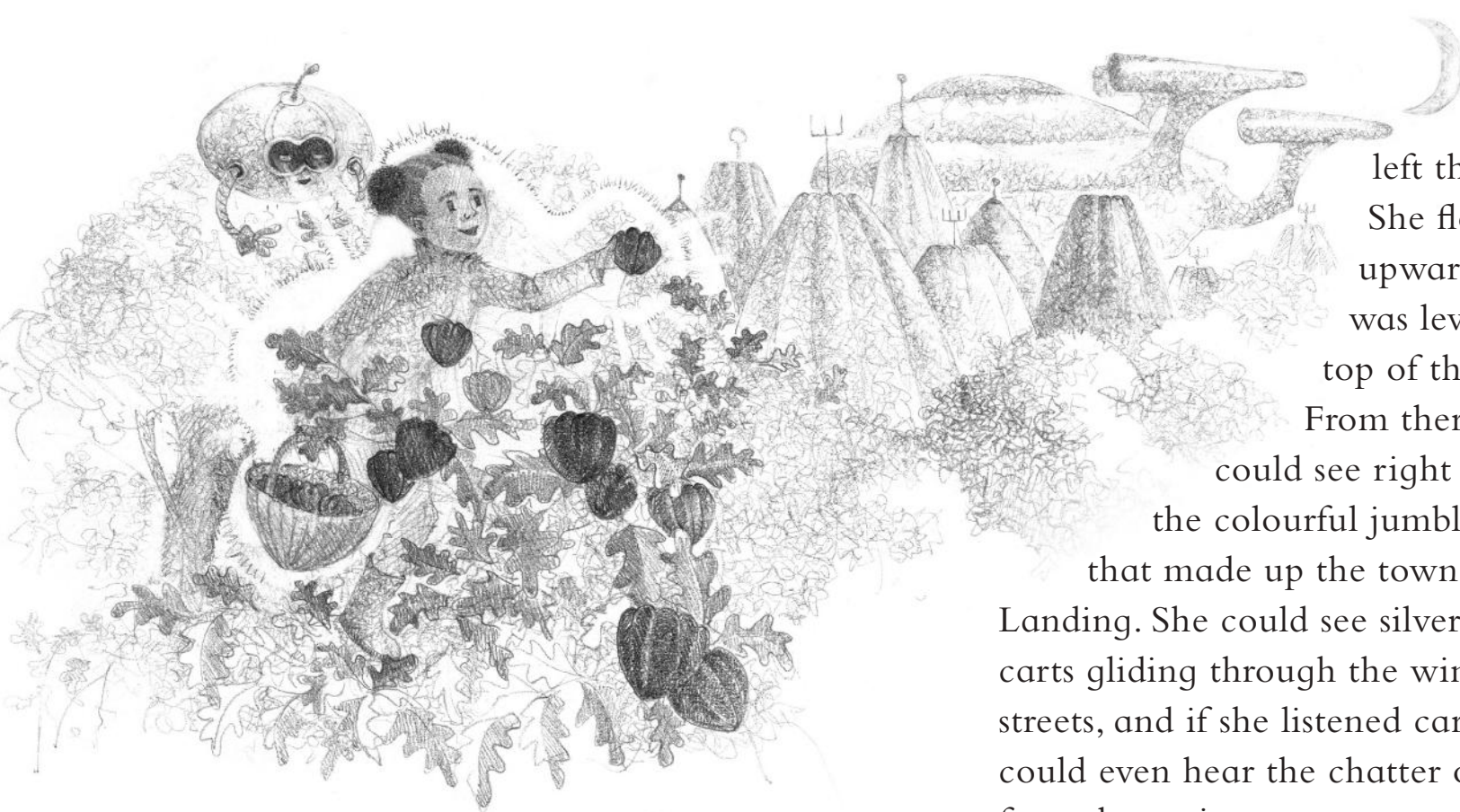
The robot rocked back and forth – it was his way of nodding.

“It could have been the wind,” he said.

Charlie frowned. She could feel a breeze blowing, though it didn't seem strong enough to have made such a loud and surprising noise.

She kept listening, but the noise didn't come again. She grabbed her basket and shrugged. “Whatever it was, it's gone now,” she said. “So we'd better get picking.”

Right at the very top of the tree she could see a cluster of shimmer-apples, sparkling in the sun. “Can you lift me up?” she asked. “I'll pick the trickiest ones first.”



“Good idea,” Random said, and he began to make a deep humming noise.

The robot was surrounded by a force field that kept him floating above the ground. If he made it larger, he could wrap it around Charlie too.

She felt a familiar tingling as her feet

left the ground. She floated upwards until she was level with the top of the tree. From there, she could see right across the colourful jumble of roofs that made up the town of First Landing. She could see silver hover-carts gliding through the winding streets, and if she listened carefully, she could even hear the chatter of voices from the main square.

Beyond the town she could make out the huge starship that had brought them to Vela. Its silver-black dome rose above all the other buildings, and its giant rockets stood out against the violet sky. A crescent moon peeked above it like an emerald jewel.

This is the most beautiful planet in the universe, she thought happily. I'm so lucky to live here.

Charlie had arrived on Vela two years ago, along with her parents and her little brother and three hundred other people. They were the first humans to settle on this faraway planet, with its twin suns and five moons. Their mission was to study the local plants and animals, without interfering with the planet's delicate natural balance.

Her memories of the long journey to get here had already started to fade. So had her memories of Earth, the planet where she'd been born ten years ago. She wondered if she would ever go back there again.

Charlie plucked a handful of shimmer-apples, placing them gently in her basket. They smelled so delicious that she could

hardly resist taking a bite. But she knew the rules: every scrap of food had to be shared equally among the settlers. It wouldn't be fair for her to tuck in.

She saw a blue sparkle through the branches and reached her hand out for the apple. The leaves brushed her face as she stretched further, as far as she could, held up by Random's powerful force field.

Suddenly she felt something. But it wasn't an apple.

It was warm.

And furry.

And moving.

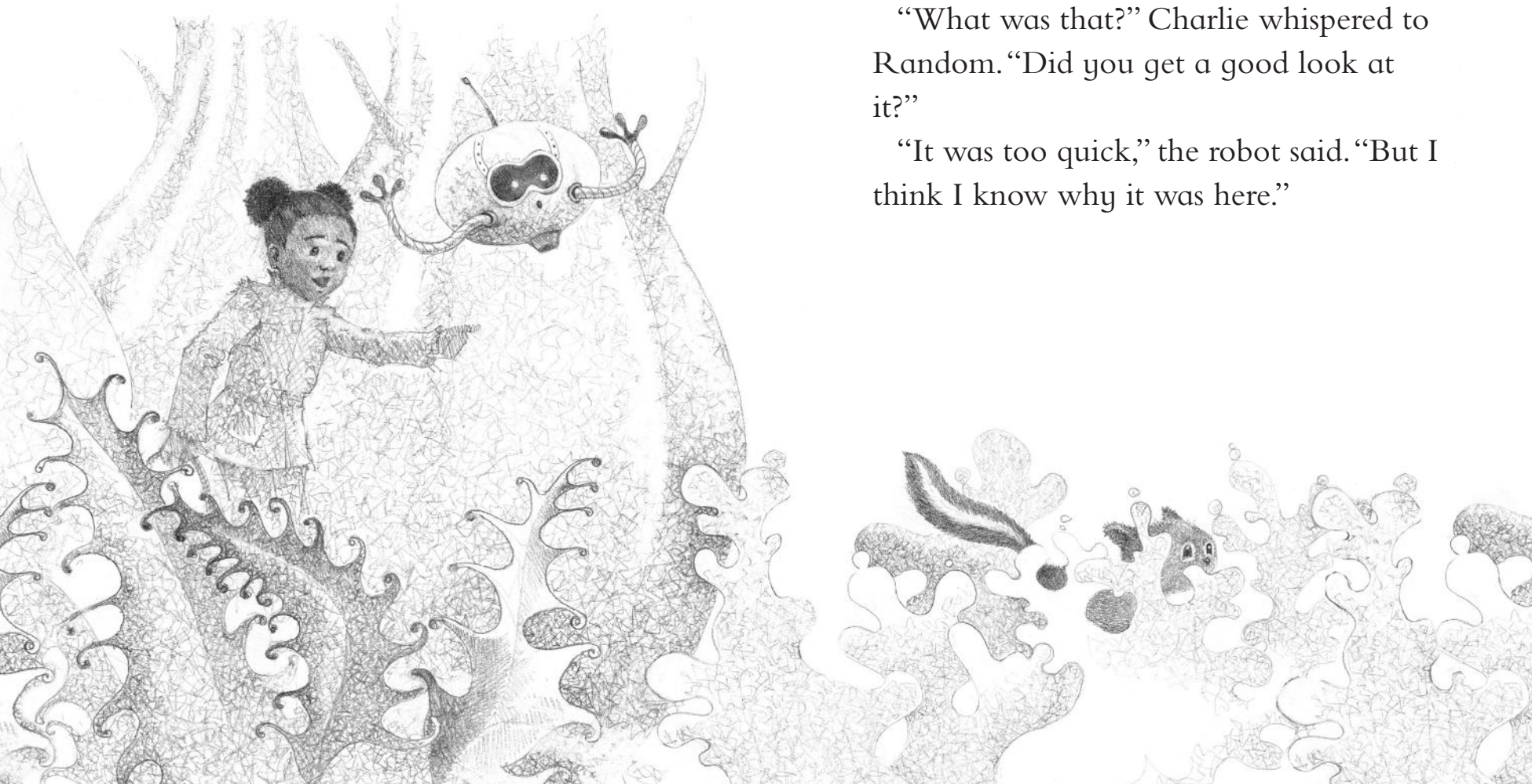
Charlie yanked her hand back in surprise as the branches parted and two green eyes stared at her. Then the leaves swung back and the eyes disappeared. The tree shook, branches stirring as something moved around inside.

"Random!" she called. "Bring me down!"

★ COSMIC CREATURES

Charlie floated down, landing neatly on the orchard floor. Above her the tree was rustling wildly. Then a dark shape jumped down from a low branch and darted away through the long grass.

The orchard was surrounded by a wall



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of bushes with green, russet and orange leaves. This was the edge of Akira Forest, the immense woodland that covered the hills beyond First Landing. The colourful bushes stirred for a few moments, then silence fell.

“What was that?” Charlie whispered to Random. “Did you get a good look at it?”

“It was too quick,” the robot said. “But I think I know why it was here.”

He pointed up into the branches. Horrified, Charlie saw what he meant.

The white leaves still fluttered in the breeze, but the blue shimmer-apples that had hung there were gone.

Charlie looked around the orchard and her heart sank. Each tree had been stripped bare. Every apple in the orchard had been taken. And she and Random had been so distracted, they hadn't even noticed.

"We have to follow it, whatever it was," Charlie said firmly, starting towards the forest. "We can't just let it steal all our apples."

"B-but –" Random protested, floating after her. "What if it's dangerous? It might be a terrible beast!"

Charlie did not slow down. "We've been on this planet nearly two years and we haven't met any dangerous

creatures yet," she said. "And anyway, if it was a terrible beast, it would have tried to eat us, not the apples. So let's go!"