On planet Vela, cute alien animals need help! Luckily, Charlie and her robot friend, Random, are ready for any rescue adventure...

When Charlie discovers a cheeky rumblebear has been stealing the town's food, she knows she must keep him hidden while she searches for his home. But it's not easy to hide a creature that roars like a lion and won't stop eating!

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COSMIC CREATURES

The Runaway Rumblebear

TOM HUDDLESTON

nosy crow

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A whole new world of animal rescue!

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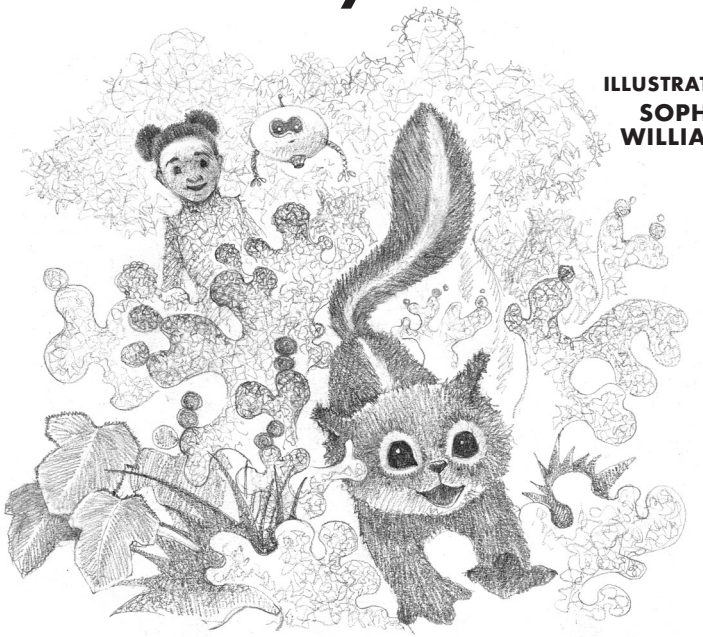
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Chapter One

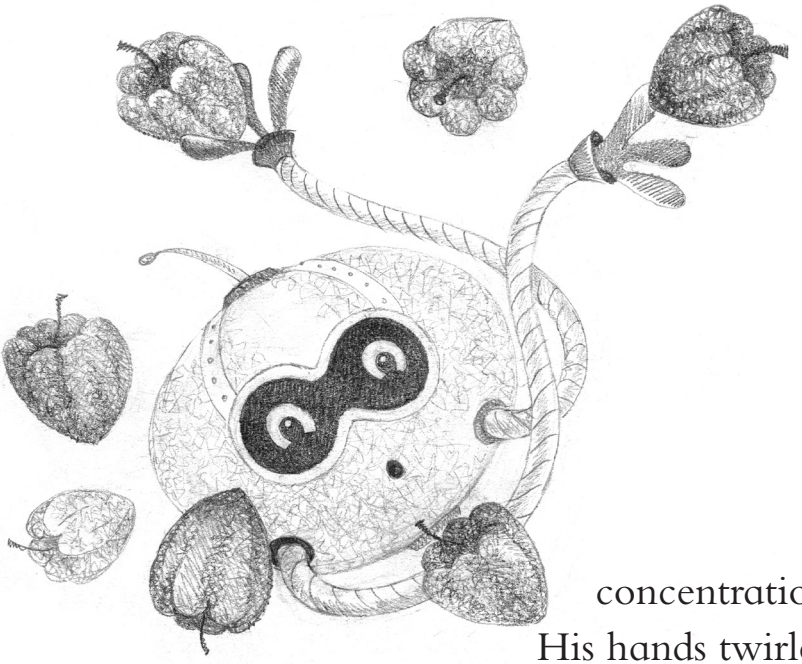
The Vanishing Apples

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



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 whir madly and his body spun like a top.

Finally the apples went flying and splatted to the ground.

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

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 some*thing* – 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.

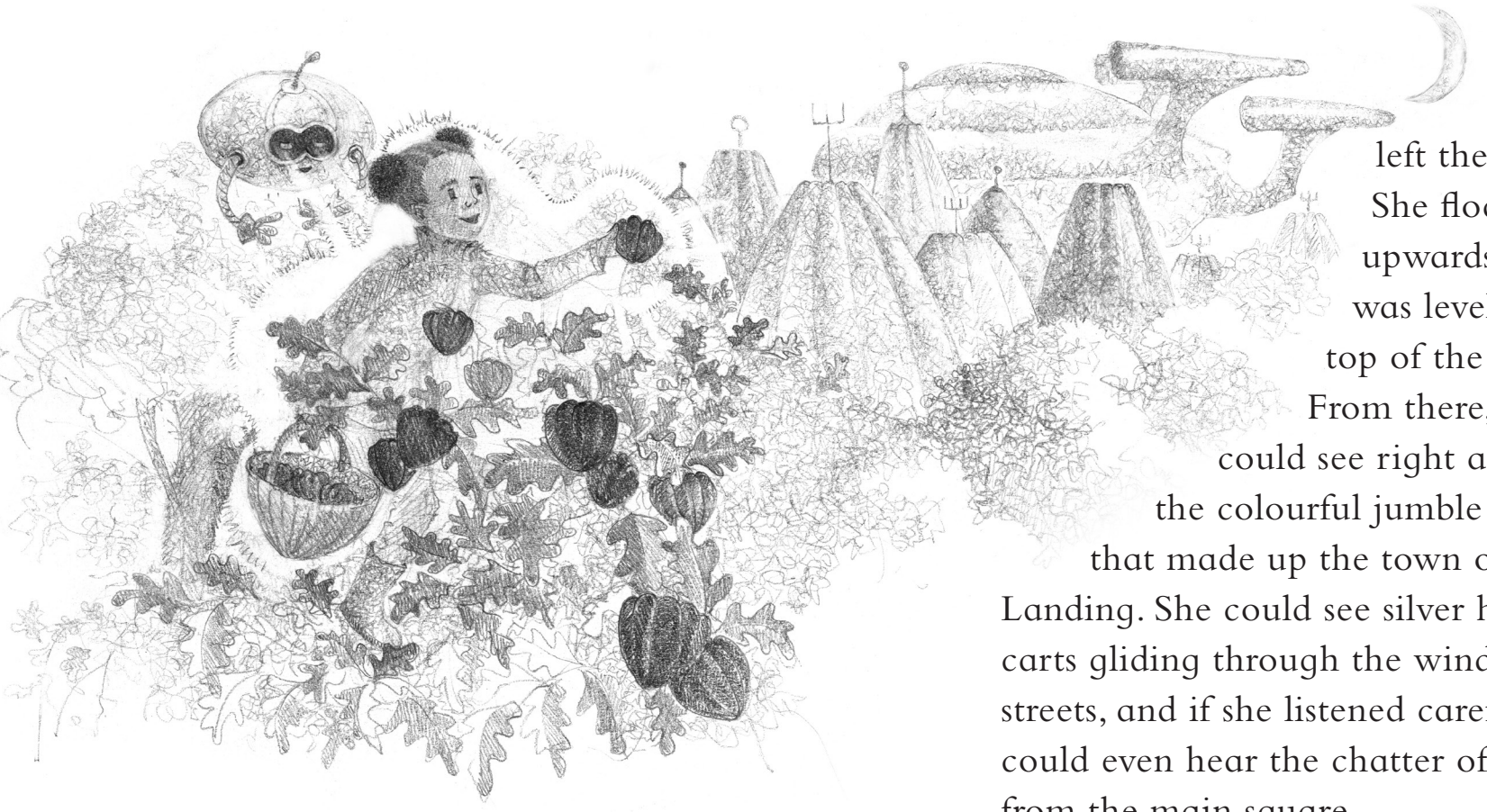
The robot rocked back and forth – it was his way of nodding.

"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.

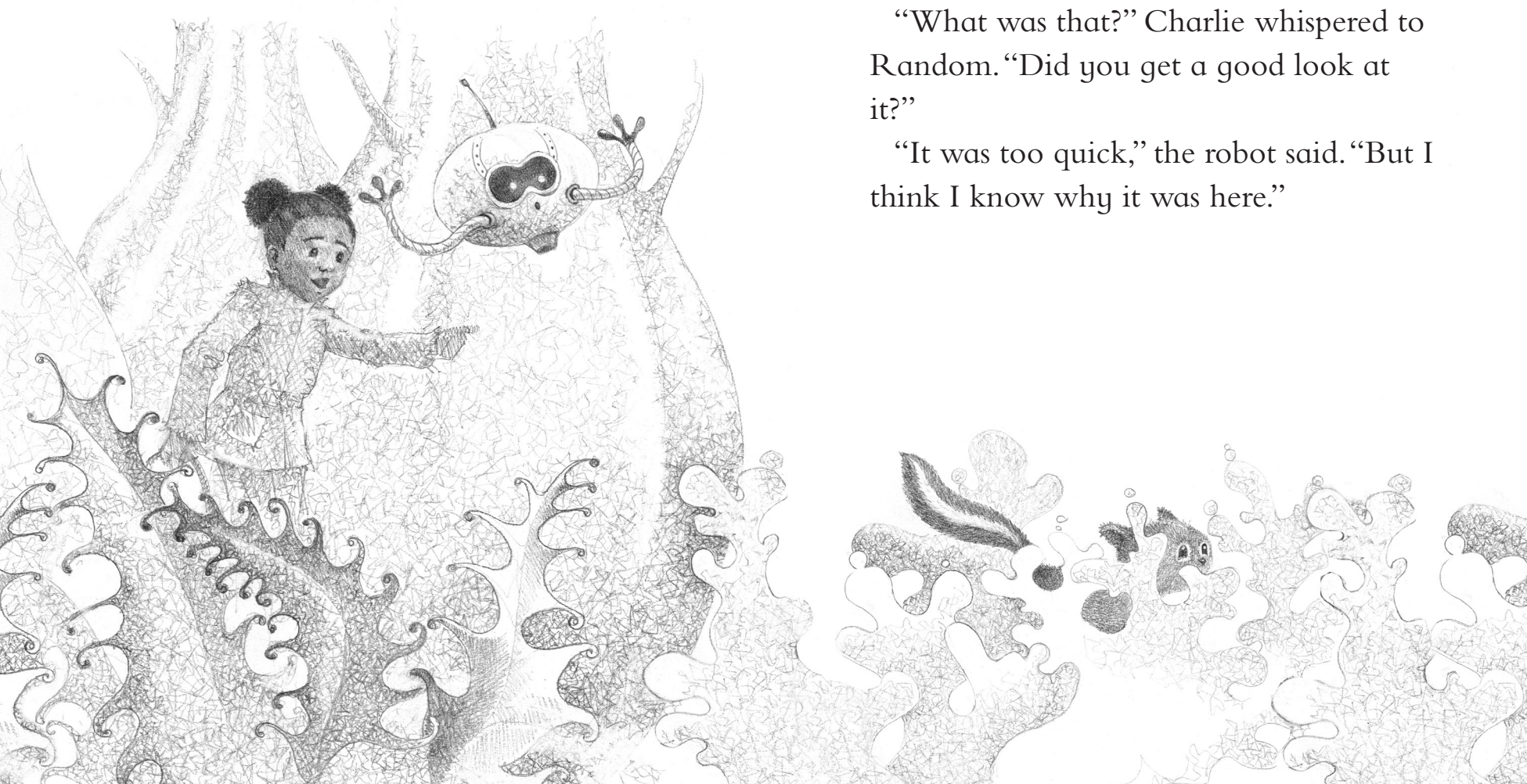
"Random!" she called. "Bring me down!"

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 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!"



Chapter Two

Silver

They stopped at the edge of the forest and Charlie's mouth dropped open.

Ahead of them, a wall of brightly coloured bushes marked the boundary of the orchard. But many of the bushes lay in tatters. Charlie saw broken branches and scattered leaves, and the forest floor was all torn up as though a herd of wild oxpigs had come charging through.

"This isn't the work of a single creature,'

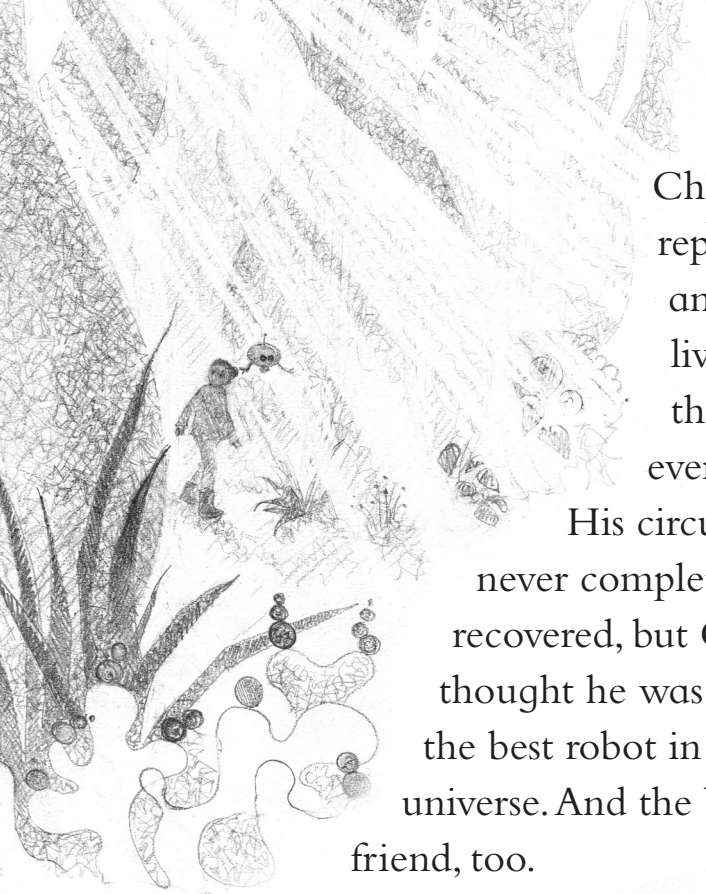
Random said, scanning the destruction with his bright electronic eyes. "There must be a pack."

"Come on, then," Charlie said. "Let's follow them while the trail's still fresh."

Random looked uncertainly between the trees. "Very well, but let me g-go f-first," he said nervously. "Then if anything happens I can p-protect you."

Charlie hid her smile. Random wasn't a soldier or a security droid – in fact he'd been designed as a constructor robot, part of the mechanical crew that had been sent to Vela to build a town for the human settlers. But there had been an accident. A building had collapsed and Random had been trapped inside.

He'd been lying on a scrapheap when Charlie found him. He had one arm missing and his memory banks were badly rusted. Her mother had helped



Charlie to repair him and he'd lived with them ever since. His circuits had never completely recovered, but Charlie thought he was the best robot in the universe. And the best friend, too.

They kept quiet as they moved deeper into Akira Forest.

Huge grey-green trunks towered over them. Red, orange and purple leaves littered the mossy ground. Sunlight fell in long shafts and birdsong echoed from the high branches like music. She heard soft squeaks and snuffles and saw a family of

green-tailed furbits scurrying off into their holes.

Charlie had been in the forest before. It was right on her doorstep, after all. But she'd never had time to really explore it. Between her chores at home, her lessons at school and helping with the harvest, she always seemed to be too busy.

Now she looked around in wonder, as the trees rose taller and the silence grew deeper. She was glad of Random at her side, his force field humming as he floated along.

There was a noise ahead of them. It was so loud and so sudden that Random instinctively extended his force field, wrapping it around Charlie to protect her.

Clutching Random, Charlie peered nervously into the undergrowth. The noise had been like a rumble of thunder, or like the lions she'd seen in old clips from

Earth. A roar…

She remembered what Random had said about a terrible beast, and shivered. What if there was something out there, something the settlers hadn't spotted before? She bit her lip. She had to be brave.

The roar erupted again and Random let out a fearful beep. The earth shook with the force of the sound. Charlie felt her knees tremble.

Then the leaves parted and something came towards them, casting a long shadow. The sunlight slanted through the trees and a furry shape was revealed.

The creature looked at Charlie with large green eyes, just the same colour as the ones she'd encountered up in the apple tree. Its fur was all standing up, like it was trying to make itself look bigger and more fierce. It didn't really work.

"Oh," Charlie said in surprise. "It's a lot smaller than I was expecting."

The creature was about the size of a puppy. It only came up to Charlie's knees, even with all its fur on end. It had a bushy tail that whisked from side to side, and was covered in bright-red fur with a shiny silver stripe along the back. Its big eyes looked up at her hopefully.

Charlie had never seen or heard of any animal like it before, not in all her time on Vela. This was a whole new species – and she was the first to meet it.

She crouched, reaching out her hand. "Hello, little friend," she said. "Were you the one making all that—"

The creature bounded forward, jumping into Charlie's arms. Then it roared again, a deafening bellow that almost made her topple over backwards.

Random spun upside down in surprise.

Then the creature shut its mouth and the sound stopped abruptly.

"How can such a little thing make such a big noise?" Charlie asked as the roar echoed away through the forest.

"I've no idea," Random admitted. "I'm just glad it's not a terrible beast."

The creature nuzzled against Charlie's



arm and she stroked its silver-striped fur. Then she noticed something. Around its mouth were little flecks of sparkly blue peel.

"Well, he's definitely one of the shimmer-apple thieves," she said. "Hang on, maybe he and his pack took our other stores too! But where are the rest of them?"

"The trail continues that way." Random pointed ahead.

"Oh, he must've got left behind!" Charlie realised, scratching the creature on its furry head. "Maybe that's why he was roaring like that. Poor thing, I think he's only a baby. We have to try to get him back to his family."

Random looked around doubtfully. "I don't think we should go any further tonight. The second sun's setting, it'll be dark soon."

"But we can't just leave him here," Charlie protested. "Not all alone in the forest. Not at night!"

The creature gave a rumble of agreement, but to Charlie's relief he didn't let out another of those earth-shaking roars. She came to a decision, clasped him carefully around the belly and lifted him as she got to her feet.

"We'll take him home with us," she told Random. "Then in the morning we can follow the trail and find the rest of his pack."

"The other settlers might not like it," Random warned. "Especially if they find out your new friend is part of the pack who have been stealing their stores."

"Then he'll have to be our secret," Charlie whispered. "It's just for one night, after all. We'll come back first

thing tomorrow and no one will have to know."

Random looked uncertain. "I don't know if it's such a good idea."

Charlie tipped her head, treating the robot to one of her most winning smiles. The creature joined in, batting its long eyelashes and letting out a purr so soft and hopeful that Charlie had to fight back a laugh.

"Oh, all right," said Random with an electronic sigh. "What's the worst that could happen?"

The creature nestled in Charlie's arms. Its fur was as soft as the fluff on a newborn chick and the stripe on its back seemed to glisten like a river of silver in the soft evening light.

"That's what I'm going to call you," Charlie decided. "Silver. That's your name."



Silver curled himself up, letting out a deep, contented rumble. It was almost as if the little creature understood what she was saying.

"But when we get back to town you'll have to stay out of sight," she told him. "And try to keep quiet, OK? No more big roars!"