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★ ★ Chapter One ★ ●

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The Shimmering Pools

Charlie floated happily on her back, held up by the warm water. Thin clouds of steam swirled over her head, allowing shafts of sunlight to sparkle on the water's surface.

That was how the Shimmering Pools got their name, and it made them one of the most beautiful places Charlie knew. There were deep pools and shallow pools, waterfalls and streams, all heated by

springs that flowed from deep caves in the mountainside. They were the perfect temperature for bathing. On a hot day the water seemed cool and refreshing, while on a chilly day like this one it made you feel warm and relaxed.

“It’s so lovely, you should come in,” Charlie said, peering up at her little brother, Maki. He sat perched on the bank, wrapped in his fleece jacket.

But Maki shook his head. “I don’t feel like it. Besides, I want to finish this game.” He looked back down at the silver

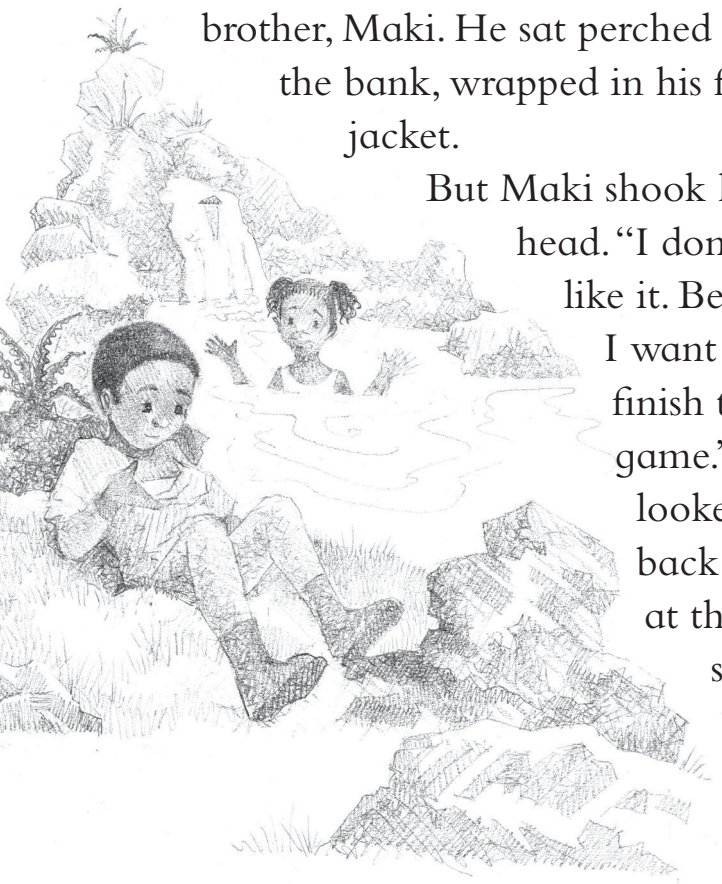
tablet propped on his knees. He tapped buttons and the game let out high-pitched *beep-bloop* noises.

Charlie knew that Maki wasn’t really telling the whole truth. He wasn’t afraid of the water, exactly – he was fine in the town baths, where all the children of First Landing learned to swim. He just didn’t like the Shimmering Pools.

She wondered if it was because there were fish in here – little shoals of silver sprats and large, purple catfish with long dark whiskers. Or perhaps it was the slippery green algae on the rocks all around that put him off. Either way, Charlie wasn’t going to push if her brother didn’t feel brave enough.

“I’m hungry,” Maki said, putting the game down at last. “Is it time for our sandwiches yet?”

Charlie stood, and found her balance



on the slippery rocks. “It must be,” she said, “because I’m hungry too.”

She waded to the bank and clambered up, shivering as she wrapped herself in a towel. From up here she could see right down the mountain slope to First Landing, a dark jumble of buildings spread out beneath the clear, cold sky.

The town was the first human colony on planet Vela. It had been founded by Charlie’s parents and their fellow settlers from Earth, who had come here to study the local plants and wildlife and to build a new home in balance with nature.

But the streets of the town seemed unusually quiet today. Normally they would be packed with vehicles, from small one-person transporters to huge electric haulers carrying building materials. Instead, every person she could see was on foot, and they were all bundled up in

layers of clothing.

Charlie knew why straight away. They’d been having problems with First Landing’s power supply for weeks, which meant that no one could charge up their vehicles, heat their water or run their radiators. And now the weather had turned cooler, it was making things rather uncomfortable.

The power shortages had even affected Charlie’s robot friend, Random. She could see him just along the bank, his rounded steel body resting beneath a gold-leafed tree, his systems shut down to save energy. She hoped they could find a new power source soon – these “naps” of his were getting longer and longer.

“So, what did Dad put in the sandwiches?” Charlie asked, pulling on her jacket and turning towards Maki. “I hope it’s not that nasty fish paste ag—”

She broke off in surprise as something soared through the steam. She didn't see it clearly. It was just a shadow, darting past Maki then vanishing again.

Her brother didn't notice, he was too busy investigating their packed lunch. But he looked up at Charlie as she rubbed her eyes and blinked.

"Are you OK?" he asked.

Charlie frowned. "Yes, I just thought... Never mind. Pass me a sandwich."

Maki handed her the bag, munching his sandwich happily. Then he reached for his silver tablet, feeling around in the grass.

"Hey, that's weird."

He picked up his jacket and his backpack and looked underneath.

"My game's disappeared. I swear I put it right there."

Charlie scanned the grassy bank. "It's got to be here somewhere," she said. "It can't

have just got up and walked away. Can it?"

Maki had all sorts of weird toys, most of them built by their mother, who was an engineer. Charlie never knew what any of them might do.

But her brother shook his head. "No, it's just a regular pocket-game. But I was right on the last level so—"

He was interrupted by a sudden electronic alarm. Charlie heard the wail of a siren and a deafening robotic voice.

"WARNING!" it cried. "STRANGERS



APPROACHING!”

She turned towards Random in surprise. The robot was rising off the bank. His eyes flashed and his arms waved madly.

“WARNING!” he shouted again.
“WARNING!”

Then he blinked and seemed to remember where he was.

“Random,” Charlie asked, “are you okay?”

The robot floated closer, looking sheepish. “Apologies,” he said. “Being on low battery makes my systems act strangely. And I was in a very deep sleep.”

Charlie smiled. She knew that Random’s circuits were a bit rusty, but he was still her favourite robot in the universe – and her best friend, too.

“So there aren’t any strangers approaching?” Maki asked, looking around.

“Yes,” Random said. “There are. From that direction.”

Charlie saw a large, dark shadow in the mist above the water, moving towards them. A red light flickered in the gloom and Maki took hold of Charlie’s arm.

Then the fog parted and a robot was revealed, much larger than Random and built from black steel. It hummed as it approached, its single eye gleaming.

Random looked up at the newcomer nervously. “G-greetings,” he said. “What’s your name, friend?”

But the robot didn’t respond. It loomed closer, reaching the bank.

Then a familiar voiced called out, “He can’t answer you. I haven’t fitted his voice circuits yet.”

Charlie grinned as she saw her mother, Shona, emerging from the fog. Her ginger hair was tied into a bun and she was

carrying a large red toolbox.

But Charlie was less pleased to see the man at her side. Captain Akira Robinson was the self-styled leader of First Landing. His moustache glistened in the steam, and the captain's badge on his green uniform looked freshly polished.

“Well now,” he said, squinting down at Charlie. “What are you up to? Making trouble, no doubt.”

Charlie flushed. “I was just swimming.”

“Mum, my game's gone missing,” Maki said. “It was right here, then it just vanished.”

“That's strange, dear,” Shona said. “Keep looking, I'm sure you'll find it.”

“What are you doing up here?” Charlie gestured at the tall black robot. “And who's the big guy?”

“That's my latest project,” Shona winked. “I call him Rotor.”

“He's our ticket to unlimited electricity,” the captain beamed. “Not that a child



like you could possibly understand the wonders of geothermal energy.”

“It’s heat from beneath the ground,” Charlie told him. “It’s what warms these pools. Why, are you going to try and tap into it?”

“Precisely,” Shona said with a proud smile. She gestured towards a dark opening in the mountainside nearby. “We’re going to explore these caves, and hopefully find a thermal vent that we can use to power the town.”

“Then I can finally have a hot shower again,” the captain grumbled.

“Can we come?” Charlie asked. “I’ve finished swimming, and I’ve always wanted to look in the caves. Dad said it was too risky to go alone, but with you...”

Shona shrugged. “It’s fine by me. But stay close. What about you, Maki?”

The boy looked around for his game, but there was no sign of it.

“OK,” he said. “Maybe when we get back it’ll have turned up again.”