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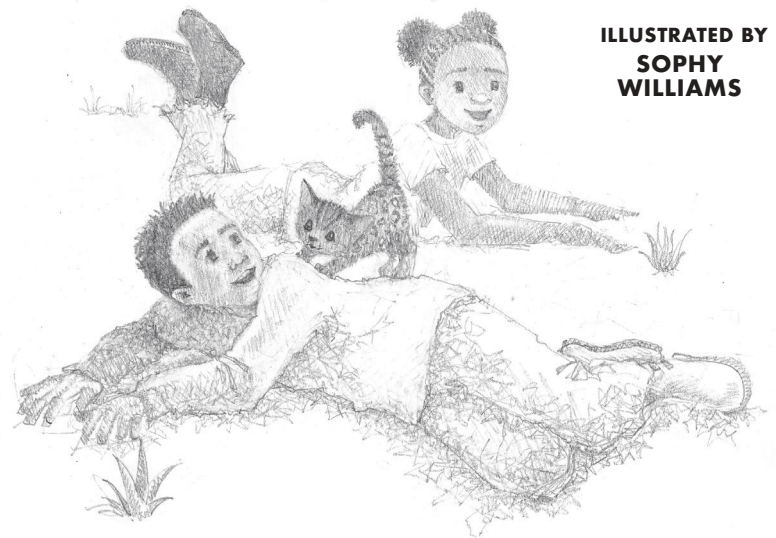
**Look out for:**

*The Runaway Rumblebear*

*The Helpful Hootpuff*



**The Friendly Firecat**



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★ • Chapter One ★  
• **The Star Eagle** •  
★ ★ • ★

From the window of the spaceship, Charlie could see the glowing blue curve of the planet's horizon. Vela was spread out below them like a patchwork quilt, its shining purple seas and crystal-blue mountains, and its endless emerald forests teeming with wildlife. Beyond the horizon, the stars shone white.

"It's almost time to land," said Random the robot, as he floated at Charlie's

shoulder. “Take us down, pilot.”

“Aye aye, sir!” Charlie saluted with a grin. She tugged on the steering stick and felt the *Star Eagle* shake and shudder around her. Gravity pushed her back into her seat.

“Is it supposed to be making that noise?” her little brother Maki piped up. He was strapped safely into the passenger seat beside Charlie, watching through the front screen as the planet rushed up towards them. The green land had given way to a great sandy desert,

baked by the twin suns of Vela.

“What noise?” Charlie asked him. “I don’t hear

any noise.”

Maki tipped his head to listen. “A sort of rumbling. Like, *grrrrrrrrr*.”

“That’s the engine!” Charlie laughed. “If it stops, *then* we’ve got a problem.”

It was her tenth time flying the little landing craft, and by now she knew all the tricks. This was the first time she’d flown the *Star Eagle* without one of her parents to guide her, but Random was there to take over in an emergency.

*Not that there’s going to be an emergency,* she reminded herself. *We’re just going to have a nice quiet holiday, with no adventures.*

The sky outside turned from black to blue as the spaceship dipped lower.

Charlie could see the plain below more clearly now, with its rolling dunes and rocky gullies. It was very different from her home of First Landing, where everything was green and growing. But



Vela was a world of endless variety. Charlie knew she could spend her whole life exploring it and still never learn all its secrets.

“That must be the colony,” Random said, and pointed to a dark blot in the distance. Peering closer, Charlie could make out the huddled shapes of buildings.

“You’re right,” she agreed. “I’m picking up their landing beacon. I’ll let the autopilot take it from here.”

She knew that even the most experienced pilots preferred to let a spaceship land itself – it was just safer that way. She swiped the screen and felt the ship’s computer take control.

The *Star Eagle* swooped in, heading for a flat patch of ground with a big white circle painted on it. The engines whined and Charlie felt the soft bump

as they touched down. She unbuckled her belt as the entrance ramp began to lower. A hot breeze swept into the cockpit, bringing swirls of dry dust.

Maki unclipped his belt and joined Charlie at the top of the ramp. The second colony had only been founded a year ago, and many of the buildings were still half finished. They hunched beneath the pale-blue sky, battered by the desert wind.

“Doesn’t seem a very friendly sort of place,” Maki said.

“Oh, you just have to get used to it!” said a loud voice. Someone was striding across the landing pad towards them. She was short and broad, bundled into a brown jacket with a scarf across her face to keep the dust out. It made her look like a bandit, but Charlie knew that wasn’t the case.



## COSMIC CREATURES

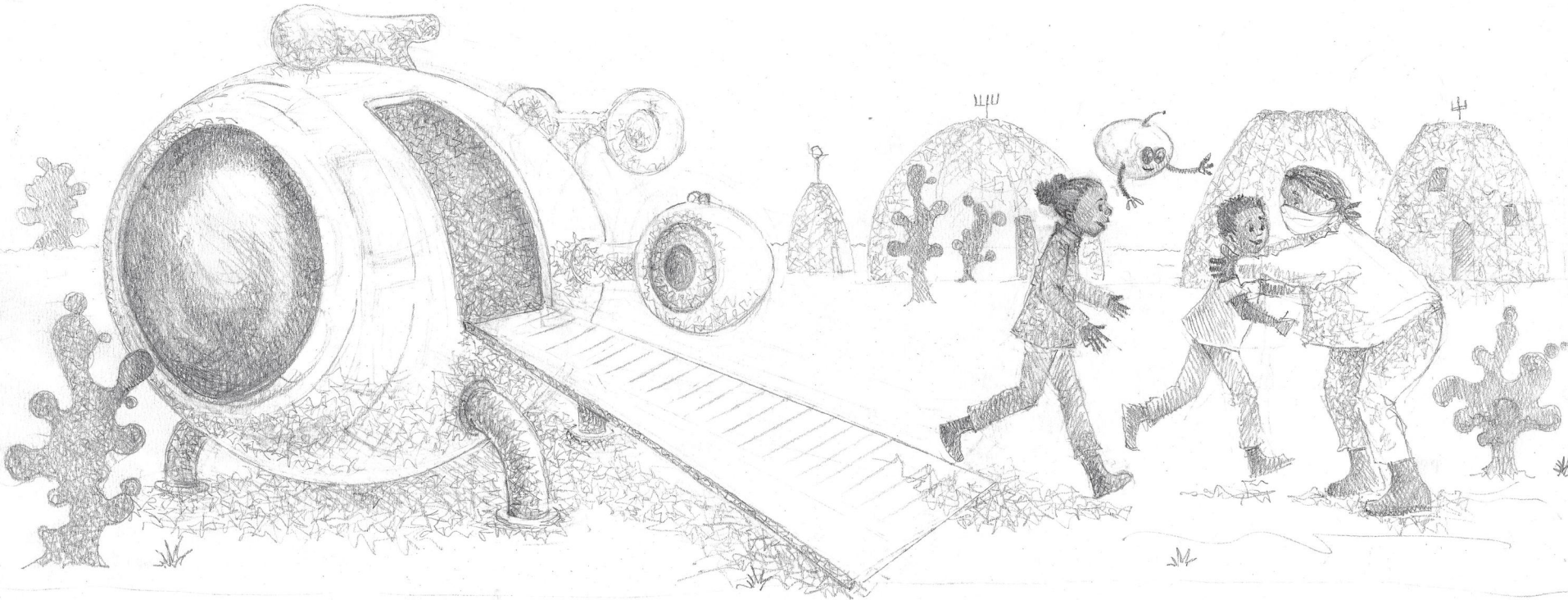
“Aunt Letitia!” Maki cried, racing down the ramp. The woman scooped him up without slowing her stride. She tickled him fiercely, then she put him down and gave Charlie a warm hug. Her skin was rough and she smelled of engine oil and horse hair.

“Hello, Auntie,” Charlie said. “Or do we have to call you Madam Mayor now?”

## ★ The Friendly Firecat ★

Aunt Letitia laughed. “Folks around here just call me Boss,” she said with a twinkle in her eye. “Welcome to Firecat Plains, both of you. I know it doesn’t look like much, but I couldn’t wish for a better home. The skies are wide, the suns are warm and the earth is full of useful metals and minerals!”

“We can’t wait to look around. Can we,



Maki?” She nudged her brother.

“Um, sure,” he managed.

“Well actually, that’ll have to wait,” Aunt Letitia said, striding past them up the ramp. “I just got word this morning. They’re on the move.”

Charlie followed her aunt back into the *Star Eagle*’s cockpit, watching as she strapped herself into the pilot’s chair and began to flip switches.

“What’s on the move?” Charlie asked, confused.

Aunt Letitia pulled her scarf aside and gave an excited grin.

“The reason I invited you both out here,” she said. “But I don’t want to spoil the surprise. Come on, buckle up.”

Charlie and Maki did as they were told, and Random bobbed between them as the *Star Eagle* took to the air again. Charlie gazed at the town of Firecat Plains spread

out below.

“What’s a firecat?” she wondered aloud.

“Why is the town called that?”

But her aunt just smiled again and gave a mysterious wink.

Aunt Letitia flew the *Star Eagle* across the plain towards a range of rocky mountains. “You got here just in time,” she said. “This only happens twice a year, and it really is an unmissable sight.”

She twisted the stick, aiming for a patch of flat ground at the base of a tall cliff. On either side of it, narrow canyons cut deep into the rock.

“Those are the Ragged Ravines,” she explained. “The only clear route through the Umber Mountains.”

Charlie felt the landing legs touch down and smelled the hot wind as the ramp lowered. Aunt Letitia strode down, and Maki raced after her. Charlie looked at



Random and shrugged, then they both followed.

Before them the mountains rose tall and bare. In their shadow sat the *Star Eagle*, the dust of the desert already coating her steel hull.

But that was odd – the spaceship appeared to be trembling. Had Aunt Letitia forgotten to turn the engine off?

Then Charlie realised. The ground was shaking.

She could feel it through her boots. There was a sound too, growing louder. A low, drumming rumble, like the pounding of many feet.

“Here they come!” Aunt Letitia said, squeezing Charlie’s arm excitedly and



## COSMIC CREATURES

pointing towards the mouth of one of the canyons.

At first, all Charlie could see inside the ravine was a faint blue glow, like an approaching dawn. But it was already daytime – and the glow was growing brighter.

Suddenly something burst from the canyon's mouth. For a moment Charlie thought it was water: a great river gushing from the ravine.

Then she saw paws pounding the earth, causing clouds of dust to rise. She saw blazing yellow eyes and sleek electric-blue bodies.

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