

TROUBLE IN THE FOODLANDS

BY JOHANNA KNOX



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"Exactly, Minnie."

It takes only seconds to understand: there's trouble in the Foodlands. I leap up. "I'm on it," I say.

Last year, the Foodlands district seethed with unrest. Doctor Wagener, a famous robotics engineer, bought a large farm and fired the workers. Seed sowers, harvesters, packers, even the accountant – he replaced the lot with robots. "They're a hundred times smarter," Doctor Wagener claimed. "And more efficient. No one will be able to compete." Wagener said robots were the future. He had plans. Other farmers in the district became nervous and distracted. Crops failed. There were food shortages. The situation played right into Wagener's hands.

By a stroke of luck, my scientist friend Doctor Topp had been using Martian bacteria as a preservative. She had enough sauerkraut stockpiled to bolster the food supply for several months. But then Wagener went quiet. Few bothered to ask why. They only cared that the crisis had passed and we could stop eating fermented cabbage.

The sun is rising above the mountains when I arrive in the Foodlands. I hear a loud argument coming from one of the farmhouses.

Inside, Sally O'Malley has a man tied to a chair. He's wearing garden netting. "Take him and lock him up!" Sally says to me.

"It's her chickens that need locking up," the man cries. "They're destructive!"

"They're not!" says Sally.

A chicken runs past, and the man lunges. "Let me at it!"

I block him. "Stop. Your name?"

"Tim Little." He glares after the chicken.

"From?"

"Next door. I got up this morning, and Sally's chickens had dug up my cabbages. The crop's ruined."

"Rubbish," says Sally. "My chickens free-range in my orchard and fertilise my apple trees with their manure. Permaculture, right there! Why would I share that?"

"You want to destroy me," says Tim. "You're jealous because my cabbages make more money." He rocks the chair. "Let ... me ... go!"

"He's delusional!" says Sally.

"Take me to the cabbage field, Tim," I say. Despite Sally's protests, I untie the man, making him promise to leave the chickens alone.



Next door, things are worse than I'd imagined: deep holes, cabbages ripped from the ground, and shredded leaves everywhere! This was no work of chickens.

Something moves by the fence, but before I can investigate, I hear Sally shouting. I find her in the orchard. Every tree is bare. The apples are strewn across the ground. "Don't say my chickens did *this*," Sally wails.

Tim has followed me. He gapes. "I'm so sorry," he says, and clearly means it.

I shiver. Something or someone is attacking Foodlands' crops. If I don't get to the bottom of this – fast – Mars will face a second food crisis.

I look across to Doctor Wagener's enormous mansion – Sally's other neighbour.

"Do you see much of the doctor?" I ask.

"Never," says Sally. "He arrived here full of talk. Said his robots would make his farm the most profitable on the planet. Blah blah. Then ... nothing."

"I don't think he's grown a thing," says Tim.

"Robots aren't as clever as he thought," says Sally bitterly.

As if on cue, the grass rustles. Something like a wētā – one the size of my head! – scuttles away.

"Stay here," I tell Sally and Tim. I jump into my police pod. "To Wagener's mansion!"

The doctor's driveway is lined with hedges that are crawling with the wētā-like things. I look closer and see clippers. So, he's invented robots for trimming hedges. I wonder what else they can do? I survey the doctor's empty fields, and in a flash, I realise his plans have failed. Artificial intelligence *can't* beat human intelligence, and now, humiliated, he's programmed his robots to destroy his neighbours' farms. A classic act of revenge.

I knock on the mansion door. A small robot on wheels, with one arm and three eyes, answers. Its voice is a little too high. "May I help you?" the door-bot squeaks.

"Is Doctor Wagener in?"

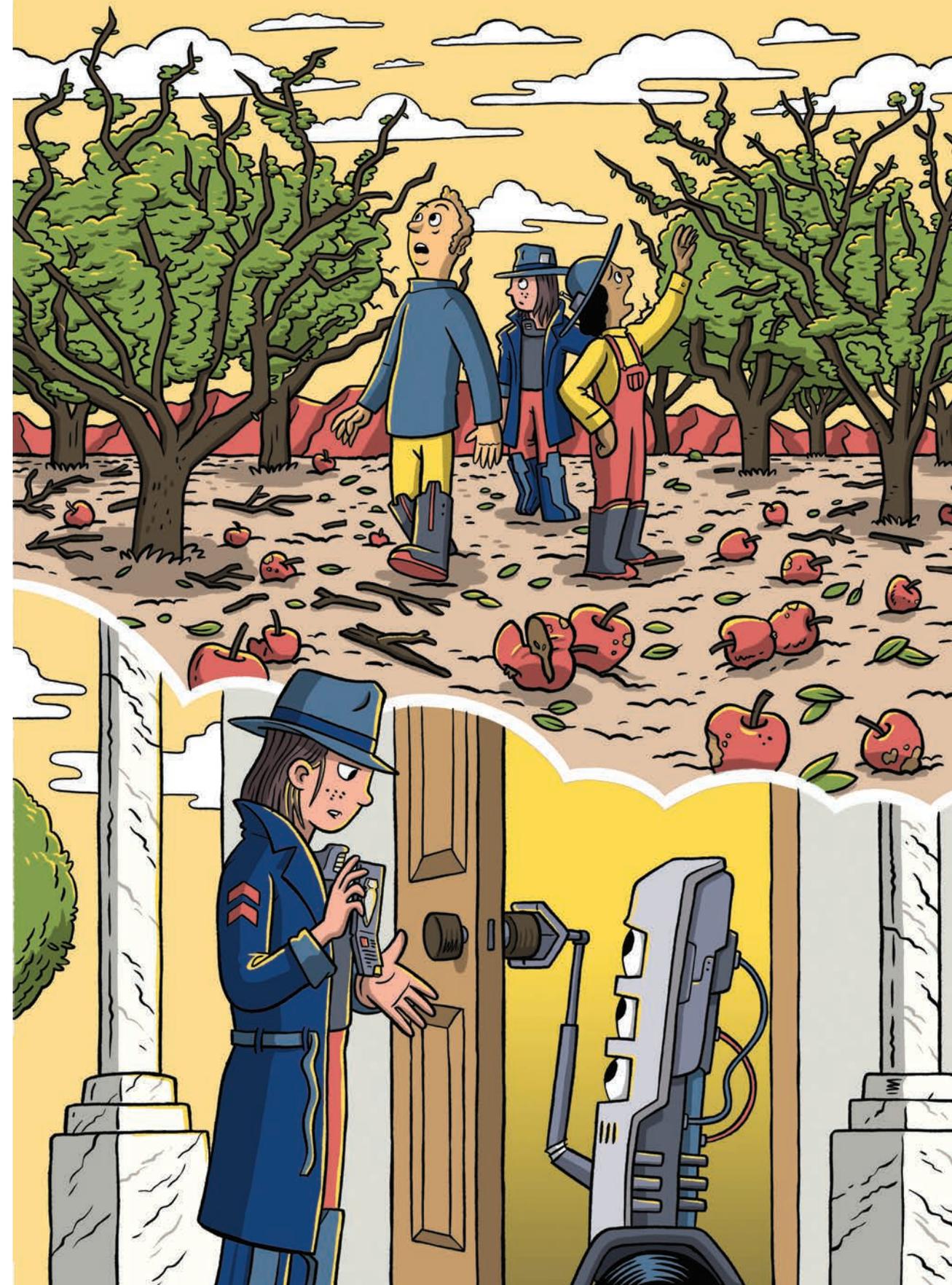
"Do you have an appointment?"

I flash my card. "Red Planet Police. I need to see the doctor immediately."

"Doctor Wagener sees no one without an appointment."

"Then I wish to make an appointment immediately."

A stream of numerals runs past the door-bot's eyes. It appears to be thinking. Then it repeats, "Doctor Wagener sees no one without an appointment."



Clearly not the smartest piece of software. I have an idea. "My name is No One," I say. The robot remains motionless. A few more numerals tick past its eyes.

I try to be clearer. "You say Doctor Wagener sees no one without an appointment? Well, I'm No One. Hello."

"Goodbye," says the robot and closes the door.

So much for that.

I sidle round the building, looking for another point of entry. I spot an open window and peer in. What luck! There's Doctor Wagener. He sits at a workbench, building wētā-bots ... but something's wrong. He looks miserable. Then I see wētā-bots clamped over his feet. A prisoner! Not your classic case of revenge after all. What's going on?

I vault through the window. Doctor Wagener's eyes widen. "Talk to me," I say.

He tries to get his words out. "I - I - I -"

The instant he speaks, a siren goes off.

"I - I - I -" he wails.

"You what?" I yell. "Tell me."

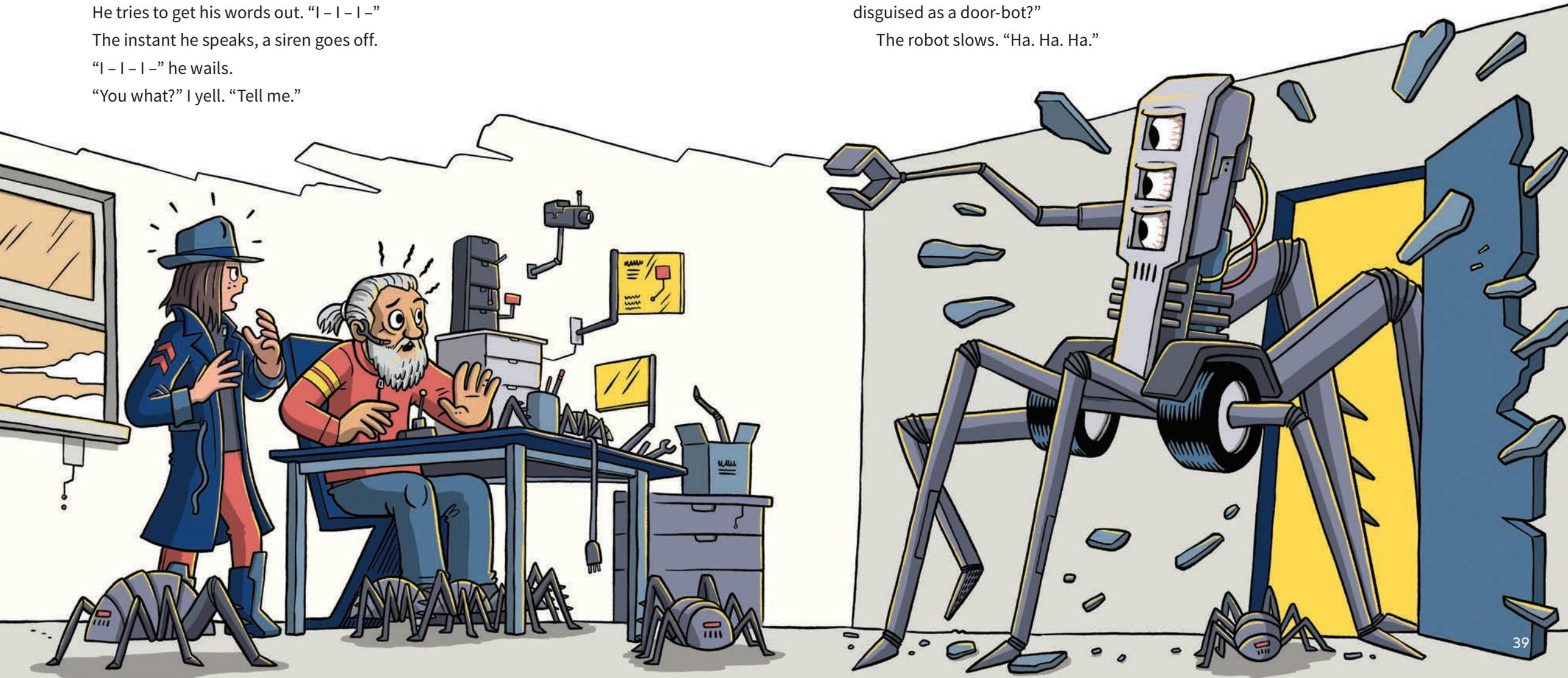
Before the man can explain, the door crashes open: it's the door-bot from before, and it means business. Those wheels have extensions. Now the heap of metal is as tall as the doorway.

"Well," the door-bot says, its voice much deeper. "If it isn't Detective No One. Ha, ha, ha." Numerals speed past its eyes so fast they begin to blur. I think back to everything I know about Doctor Wagener. Something Sally said this morning sticks in my mind. Why does this robot do so much number crunching?

The door-bot takes a wētā-bot from the table and clamps it over the doctor's mouth. It selects two more from the floor. Then it comes for me.

I back slowly towards the window and try distracting it with a question. "Let me guess," I say. "You're Doctor Wagener's accountant-bot, disguised as a door-bot?"

The robot slows. "Ha. Ha. Ha."



I continue. “Doctor Wagener programmed you to make this the most profitable farm on Mars, am I right?”

“That is my directive. I will achieve it.”

“But your limited artificial brain took the crudest path. Make the other farms *less* profitable. Never mind that there’d be no *food* ... a consideration that’s a little too nuanced for a robot.”

“Ha, ha, ha. You’re smart. For a human.”

I’m nearly at the window. “So you’ve sent wētā-bots to destroy all the crops! Against the doctor’s wishes – clearly. Perhaps the man has a conscience after all?” I turn to jump out the window, but something grabs my collar. It appears that the accountant-door-bot’s one arm can also extend.

“I detect you will try to thwart me from achieving my directive,” the robot says. “You must be destroyed.”

Now I’m in real trouble. Is there a way to shut this thing down? If only Wagener could tell me, but he’s gagged.

Then I realise. He did tell me!



“Go on, destroy me!” I taunt.

The robot lifts me right to its face, and lightning fast, I deliver three swift punches. Eye, eye, eye. The numerals start to fade. The arm releases me, then falls away with a clang. All the wētā-bots sag. The one on Doctor Wagener’s mouth thuds on the table, and the man bursts into tears. “The robots took over,” he sobs.

“Wow, dramatic,” comes a voice from behind. It’s Tim, leaning in the window.

Sally’s head appears beside him. “Doesn’t save our cabbages and apples.”

“I have an idea,” I say.

After more officers arrive to secure the scene, I call Doctor Topp. She likes my idea and says she’ll receive the supplies immediately. There won’t be cabbage or apples this year, but we’ll sure have a lot of cider vinegar. And we’ll be back to eating sauerkraut after all.

illustrations by Toby Morris



Trouble in the Foodlands

by Johanna Knox

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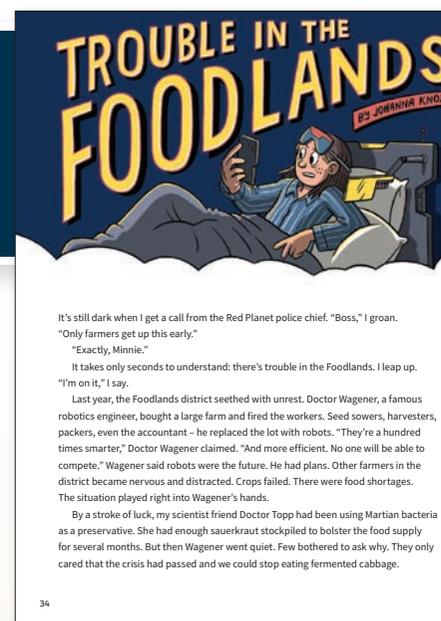
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