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The Search for WondLa

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The Search for Wondla



PART I



CHAPTER 1: ALONE

Eva Nine

was dying. The tiny scarlet dots on her hand mirrored the glowering eyes of the snake that had just bitten her.

Sitting down on the prickly ground of dead brown pine needles and small cones, she felt the curdled coil of nausea wind its way up her throat from her stomach.

She dropped the sweaty handful of moss that she had scooped up from the forest floor.

"Kindling," her Omnipod had instructed her earlier in its chirpy voice. "Find a flammable substance such as dry twigs or moss to begin your fire." The large gathering of boulders Eva had found had seemed like the perfect place to make

a shelter for the night, and the surrounding area was blanketed in ashen puff-patches of reindeer moss. As she had knelt down to gather a clump, Eva had realized there was a rusty mottled snake just next to her, sunning itself in the fading light. She'd realized too late, though, to avoid its bite.

Now, with trembling hands, she fumbled through her dingy satchel to retrieve her Omnipod. The handheld metallic device was flat, like a magnifying glass, with a small circular hole in the middle of it that resembled an eye. Eva's heart pounded, as if trying to escape her chest. She swallowed, interrupting the hectic meter of her breathing. The shoulder patch on her tunic blinked off and on in warning.

"This is Eva Nine," she whispered into the Omnipod. "Initiate I-M . . . um, I-M . . ."

Eva closed her eyes and concentrated. She put the device to her forehead, as if the Omnipod would whisper to her brain the command she needed.

"Greetings, Eva Nine. How can I be of service?" the device chirped.

"I . . . um . . ." Her hands shook. "I need you to initiate Independent Medical—"

"Do you mean Individual Medical Assistance?

IMA for short?" the Omnipod corrected her.

"Yes," she answered, licking her dry lips and trying to hold her insides in.

"Is this an emergency?"

"Yes! I need help right away!" Eva yelled at the Omnipod.

"What is the nature of your emergency?"

"S-snake bite," Eva said with a gulp. The nausea lurked just under her tongue, ready to leap out.

"Hold, please. Initiating Identicapture." Eva watched as three tiny lights on the Omnipod flickered in a rhythm around its central eye. "Begin Identicapture of said snake. We need to determine if it is a poisonous species or not."

Through glassy eyes Eva scanned her immediate area; she could no longer focus on the terrain around her, let alone find a snake disguised as the forest floor. Her eyes rolled up into her head. Her breathing slowed. She let the Omnipod slip from her fingers.

Eva fell back, like a slain giant collapsing in a miniature forest of moss. She looked up at the fading light of the cobalt blue sky. Her Omnipod lay alongside her as it repeated, "Please begin Identicapture."

All Eva could whisper was, "Dead. I'm totally dead."

A voice from the heavens echoed through the landscape. It was a kind and graceful voice, like the sort she'd heard coming from a beautiful woman in an old movie.

"Eva. Eva, dear, please get up," the voice said. Just like in an old moving picture, Eva could also hear the slightest bit of static hidden in the dulcet intonation.

The pine trees seemed to whisper the girl's name as the cool of evening blew in. Somewhere in the distance a whip-poor-will beckoned the night. Eva cracked open her pale green eyes into little slits.

"Eva Nine," urged the voice, "get up."

The girl rolled onto her side. Lying on the forest floor, she examined the tuft of moss in her hand. She saw that the delicate network of stalks really did make it look like a shrunken tree, albeit a washed-out lifeless one. How does such an insignificant plant survive in a big world? she wondered. What is its purpose? What is my purpose?

"Eva, please—"

"I'm dead," Eva announced to the sky. "Or couldn't you tell? I'm gone. Deceased. No more. Deeeaaaaad!"

She turned her attention back to the little moss

tree and pouted. "It's not like you have to worry about that," she muttered.

The clump of moss disappeared in her hands, dissipating into a cloud of light motes. Eva curled up into a ball, shutting her eyes as the world around her also evaporated into nothingness. Emptiness.

The voice was right next to her now. "Eva, what happened?"

"Leave me alone," the ball replied.

"You were not paying attention," the voice said with a sigh. "You had a ninety-eight percent chance of discovering the snake had you done a simple Life-Scan sweep. It was right there in plain view."

Still curled as a ball, Eva said nothing.

"Of course, I have to mark you as a failure on this particular survival skill test. We shall try it again tomorrow. All right?" said the voice.

A warm hand brushed Eva's half-braided dirty-blond hair. At last Eva stood up.

Two dark orbs, emitting an amber glow from deep within, reflected Eva's own face in a distorted fashion, like a fish in a fishbowl. Large automated eyelids clicked open and closed in a lifelike manner. Several other eyes, small and unblinking, studied the girl, recording endless data and sending it to a computerized brain. A brain that was

contained in two metallic canisters mounted on the back of a head—the front of which displayed a mechanized silicone-rubber face.

"What is going on with you, Eva?" the automated lips mimed. "This test should have been effortless for you to pass. Is everything all right?"

One of the robot's telescoping arms extended from a carousel of several additional arms folded up around the cylindrical torso. Four wiry fingers, also tipped in silicone rubber, rubbed Eva's shoulders in a reassuring fashion.

"How is your concentration?" the robot asked. "I noted that you did not rest a full ten hours last night, which indicates that you may not have achieved enough REM sleep. That can have quite an effect on your performance."

"Not now, Muthr." Eva shrugged the robot off. "I need to be alone."

She crossed the wide squarish white room and headed for the low doorway. Buff-colored rubbery floor tiles absorbed the sound of her plodding footsteps. Though the chamber was only dimly lit, there was still enough light coming from the holo-projectors mounted around the ceiling to show that the room itself was empty of anything . . . except for the human girl and the pale blue robot.

Eva sulked as she shuffled into the main hub of her living quarters. When the large doors to the holography chamber slid shut behind her, a pastoral scene was projected onto them in vivid detail. Cottony clouds drifted aimlessly across a brilliant azure sky over distant lavender mountains. This gave the effect that the entire hub was like a grand outdoor gazebo, displaying a magnificent vista in the round—though one projection was not working properly and flickered into a corresponding nighttime scene, ruining the illusion.

"Welcome back, Eva Nine." The intercom spoke in a relaxed tone. Its words reverberated throughout the octagonal chamber. "How may I help you?" Water trickled in a distant stream, and songbirds sang, filling the vestibule with ambient sounds coinciding with the scenery.

"Hi. Please open bedroom doors, Sanctuary," Eva said, stomping across the hub toward the far window. Projected on it was a spectacular view of a misty waterfall cascading down from a colossal mountaintop. The cast image crackled as the girl passed through it, like through a holographic curtain, into the open doors of her dimly lit bedroom.

"Close doors, please." Eva flung her jackvest onto her medi-seat. She sat down on the edge

of her foam bed and kicked off her sneakboots. As she flopped back onto the oval mattress, Eva stared up at the myriad of pipes and exhaust shafts that wound through her white ceiling. There were water stains on the corner ceiling tiles of the small room, like large ochre flowers blooming from the pipes. One of the overhead lights flickered in an annoying, erratic tempo.

With her hands behind her head, Eva rubbed the soft round mole on the nape of her neck. The warmth of her electric bed permeated through her tunic in a comfy sort of way. Her eyelids drooped, and she had begun to doze off when her bedroom doors slid back open.

"Eva, you forgot your equipment satchel and Omnipod back in the holo-chamber," Muthr said, rolling into her room balanced on a single tread-worn wheel. "Honestly, dear, how can you expect to pass your training if you do not take care of your things?"

"Muthr!" Eva continued staring up at the stained ceiling, refusing to look Muthr in the eye. "Just leave it. I'll put it away later."

The robot picked Eva's dingy jackvest up from the chair. The discarded garment had been perfectly hidden among the stuffed toys, dirty clothes, and

electra-papers that were strewn about the room. "Put it away as you have done with the rest of your belongings? I sometimes wonder—"

"Please, Muthr, I just want to be alone for a while," Eva barked at the ceiling.

Muthr hung the jackvest on the empty row of coat hooks lining the wall. "Dinner is at eighteen hundred hours. Please be timely, Eva," Muthr said. After Muthr rolled out of the room, the doors slid shut behind her. Eva reached under her head and grabbed her pillow. As she squeezed it over her face, she screamed.