

A HERO FOR WONDLA



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adventure. I can't
wait to read the
rest of the series!"*

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TONY DITERLIZZI

SIMON & SCHUSTER

presents



A HERO FOR
WONDLA

by

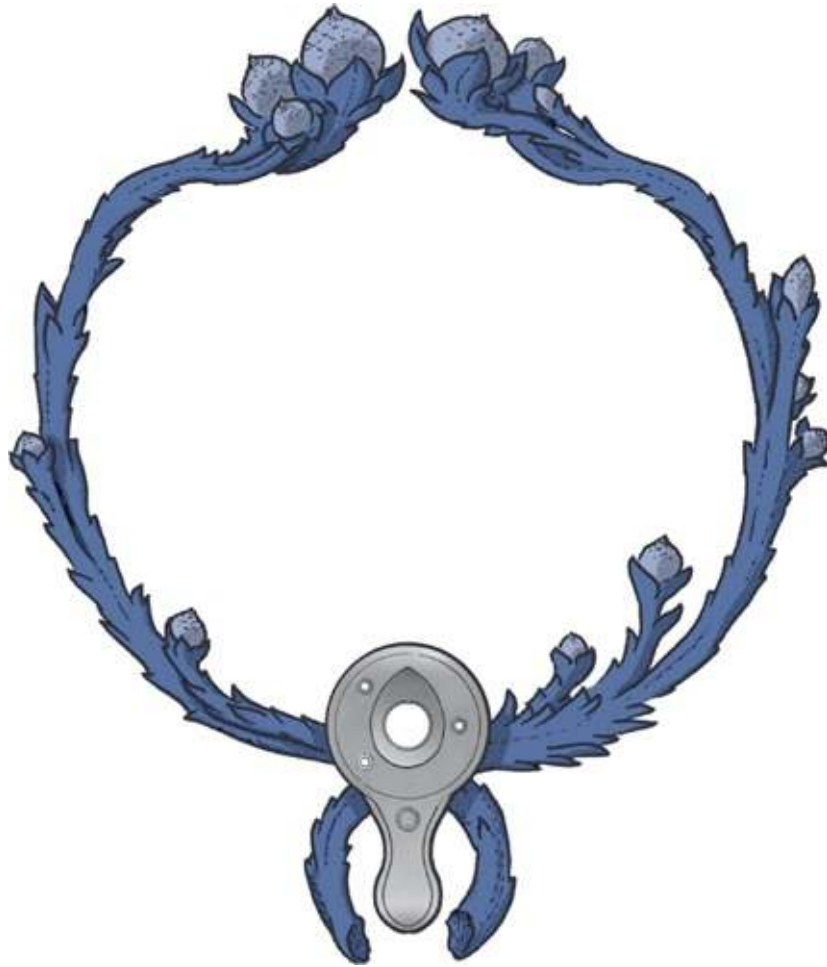
TONY DITERLIZZI

*with illustrations
by the author*

SIMON & SCHUSTER
BOOKS FOR YOUNG READERS

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Within the pages of this book you will find a hidden feature: a three-dimensional interactive game in which you pilot the *Bijou* through various terrains, just as Hailey does in *A Hero for WondLa*. This is brought to life through the wonders of *WONDLa-VISION* (also known as Augmented Reality). The illustrations on pages 19, 79, and 280 are the keys to unlock this hidden feature. Just visit **WONDLa.COM** for directions. You'll need a computer with Internet access and a webcam to get started.





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“THE UNIVERSE
is not required to be
IN PERFECT HARMONY
with human ambition.”

—Carl Sagan





CHAPTER 1: LEAVE

Eva Nine watched a turnfin flap its triple pair of wings to join its flock. The alien birds squawked in a otherworldly harmony as they soared through the eroded sun-bleached remains of buildings that had once stood as New York City.

Over the eastern horizon the morning sun was shining down on mountainous white clouds sailing slowly over the ancient ruins. Eva made her way through the twisting labyrinth of crumbled brick walls and rusted steel beams, stopping in front of a lone column blanketed in gigantic leafy lichen. She pulled her empty drinking container out of her satchel and removed the cap. Eva yanked a large corrugated leaf from the column with her hands and began to roll it up. She wrung the leaf tighter and tighter until water began to trickle from its stem.

Really? That's it? Eva thought as the dribble of water ran to the bottom of her drinking container. *This is going to take forever. I wish I'd kept my hydration tablets.* She sighed and tore off another leaf.

Traveling down the bygone avenues of a withered world, Eva paused at the gaping shadowy entrance of a tunnel that led down into the earth toward the remains of a forgotten library. Her mind flickered to the memory of the giant water bear, Otto, digging that tunnel like an enormous puppy. Eva closed her eyes. Though her loyal companion was with his herd far from here, Eva knew he was relaxed and content. She had a connection with Otto. She could understand what he was thinking when it appeared no one else could. Eva could not explain how it was that she could do this. She just *felt* it.

She opened her eyes and took in the endless barren horizon beyond the ruins. Eva whispered, "I'm happy for you, Otto. I am going to join my herd too." With a smile she continued on toward her camp.

Under the shade of a deteriorating steel archway, a lanky blue alien sat on backward-bending legs. The Cærulean, Rovender Kitt, appeared to be organizing the scattered contents of a saddlebag that hung from a parked gull-winged glider.

"You were right, Rovee," Eva said, joining her friend. She shook her mostly full drinking container. "I was able to get quite a bit of water. But with only one good hand my fingers got sore from all the squeezing."

Rovender glanced up at Eva, then continued on with his task. "Your wounds will heal soon enough." He spoke in a soft, gravelly voice. "And do not worry about your hand. You will become stronger and it will become easier." He unbuckled a second saddlebag and began rooting through it. "We shall have to hurry down some breakfast soon, though."

"Food, huh? I don't suppose you'd be interested in these at all?" Eva pulled out a voxfruit from her satchel and smiled.

Rovender stopped, a look of genuine surprise on his whiskered face. "Oeeah! Voxfruit! Out here? Well done, Eva Nine. Well done." He held up a thick-fingered hand, and Eva tossed him a piece of fruit.

"Yup," replied Eva. "I found them growing in some sort of underground transit station. I grabbed all I could carry." She opened her satchel. It was stuffed full with the exotic fruit.

"That is a good discovery. Now come." Rovender patted the ground next to where he sat. "See what I have found."

Eva knelt down next to Rovender and poured water into his empty bottle. Then, after taking a swig from her own container, she shuddered as she glanced over the booty. Like the glider, these items had once belonged to the Dorcean huntsman, Besteel. Now the huntsman's belongings had been sorted into little piles.

that were spread out over Rovender's sleeping mat.

"I told you I think it's weird going through all his stuff," Eva said, returning her drinking container to her satchel. "I don't want anything from that monster." Besteel's raptorial visage was still fresh in Eva's memory. She still half-expected the huntsman to jump out of the shadows and capture her once again.

Rovender took a sip of water and nodded in agreement. He picked up a small wooden contraption with many knobs. "Yes, yes, Eva, but you never know what we may need. Like this." He handed the gizmo to Eva.

"Uh, I give up," she said, looking at the item without the slightest interest. "What is it?"

"It is a Variable Bird Caller. You turn the knobs to attract all sorts of birds." Rovender turned one of the large knobs, and the familiar squawk of a turnfin was produced.

"Okay . . . but why would I call more turnfins? There are enough here already, don't you think?" She gave the bird caller back to Rovender.

"Perhaps," Rovender said sagely as he pocketed the item. "But then again, its use may come in handy."

Eva wondered if there were turnfins everywhere in Orbona. "Fine. But what else of Besteel's do we *really* need?"

Rovender moved his hand over the piles of odd accoutrements and opened a pouch—out of which rolled a handful of vocal transcoders. "How about these?" Rovender plucked up one of the spherical devices. "See if our new arrival would be receptive to using one. I am sure he would feel more comfortable if he could understand what I am saying." He rolled the transcoder over to Eva.

"Okay, you're right—as usual." Eva rose and held up a voxfruit. "I'll see if he's up for trying some of the local food too."

Through the scattered rubble of a desert plain Eva arrived at a sandy plot where a round airship rested on heavy landing gear.

In the late morning sun she could see that the ship had once been painted in a brilliant black and gold check, but years of neglect had taken their toll. As though the ship were an enormous insect shedding its skin, a corroded metal carapace was visible beneath the flaked-off patches of ancient enamel. Along the marrows of small hover-thrusters lining the ship's body, dried grime and exhaust ran down to the patinated chrome underbelly.

Next to one of the headlights, just below the cockpit window, a name was painted in decorative lettering: *Bijou*. Underneath the lettering were rows of decals, each in the cutout shape of a human. As Eva counted the decals, wondering what they represented, the entry ramp hissed open from the belly of the ship. Eva caught a glimpse of her reflection in the lens of a headlight before she entered. The girl looking back at her was a dirty disheveled mess.

Wriggling about, Eva pulled and tugged her rumpled tunic in an attempt to straighten it. To further smooth it she ran her bandaged hand down the front—but all she accomplished was to smear the dust that had invaded every wrinkle of her clothing. Shifting her focus from her outfit, Eva unwrapped one of the long braids that held her hair up off of her neck. Now loose, the wad of dirty-blond hair drooped down over her shoulders. Eva combed through the mop with her thin fingers trying to style it, but the effort was fruitless. Already her neck was sweating under the thick tresses. "Ugh!" Eva said with a frustrated sigh. "Whatever." She pulled her hair back up and wrapped it tight with a braid.

Nearing the open entry ramp that led into the ship, Eva heard the pulse of electronic music thumping from within. She stood at the foot of the ramp and called up, "Good morning, Hailey. Are you hungry? Hellooooo in there!"

The music did not pause, nor was there a response. Eva called out again. Finally she tiptoed up the ramp

and peered around the cramped cargo hold of the ship. Inside, the distinct scent of motor oil greeted her. This was a scent that Eva knew from her old home, her Sanctuary, and so it was somehow reassuring to her. It was the scent of machines. Machines made for people. Machines, just like this ship, that would whisk her away to a city full of people. It felt as if, after all of the searching and running, her dream—*her WondLa*—had come true.

That little crumbling picture of the girl and the robot and the adult had given Eva hope that there were others like her—humans, just waiting to be found. But the lands she searched through were not like the Earth she had learned about. These lands were full of monstrous sand-snipers, bird-eating trees, and evil alien queens. Just when she had given up all hope of the existence of other humans, a ship had fallen from the sky. A ship piloted by a boy named Hailey . . .

Last night Hailey had told Eva and Rovender that he'd come to take them to the human city. He'd come to take Eva home.

Explaining that the ship would need to recharge overnight, the young pilot had offered up sleeping accommodations in the ship's cabin. But, despite Eva's pleas that they stay on board the ship, Rovender had preferred sleeping outdoors. Eva said she had so many questions she wanted answered, but really she was curious and excited to spend time with the first human she'd ever met in all twelve years of her life.

Hailey had had to admit that he was tired from travel and needed rest. Of course Rovender had concurred. Eva's questions would have to wait. Back at camp she'd tried to fall asleep despite the electricity that coursed through her.

Lying next to the crackling fire, Eva had wondered how exciting the life of gallant Hailey must be as he searched for helpless humans to rescue from the wilds of Orbona. But thoughts of being rescued were soon interrupted by memories of Muthr.

Muthr.

For all of Eva's life her only caretaker had been Multi-Utility Task Help Robot zero-six, or Muthr for short. As Eva had grown older, her yearning to explore the surface of the planet had often led to arguments with the robot. Regardless, Muthr had taken good care of her . . .

. . . even when Besteel had ransacked their underground home.

. . . even when their trusted technology had been ineffective against the dangerous new world they faced.

. . . and especially when she saved Eva's life, although it had meant sacrificing her own.

Muthr had loved her. Eva still grieved over the robot's passing.

"Hey there," Hailey called out over the music, rousing Eva from her thoughts. A tanned teenage face peered down from an access hatch in the ceiling of the cargo hold at the bow of the airship. Even upside down the pilot's shaggy brown and blue-dyed hair was stuck to his face by a thin layer of perspiration. "Hi. He waved. "Hold on a sec. Music volume: minimum," he said. The ship responded.

Eva made her way past the disorganized stacks of crates in the hold and stood at the bottom of the access ladder. "Good morning." She pulled out one of her prized voxfruit. "I've brought you breakfast," she said, pleased with herself.

Hailey grabbed the side rails of the ladder and slid down to the floor. He took the fruit from Eva with black greasy hands. "Thanks," he said, turning it over and examining it. "What is it?"

"It's voxfruit." Eva took the fruit and ripped open the translucent rind. "You eat the berries inside." She handed the peeled voxfruit back to Hailey. He wiped his dirty hands on his stained flight suit and then gingerly grabbed a handful of the green berries from within.

"Hmm. Oh, yeah," he said through a mouth full of food. "These aren't bad."

"I also brought you this." Eva produced the vocal transcoder. "Or do you have one of these already?"

"That depends," said Hailey, eyeing the device. "What is it?"

“Well, I wasn’t sure how many languages you know, but I could tell last night that you couldn’t understand Cærulean. . . . You know, Rovee’s language.” Eva put the transcoder near her mouth. “So this little thingy will allow you to understand *all* the different languages of the aliens. You just press this button, speak into it, and inhale the micro transmitters that it releases. It will do the rest.” She dropped the device into his palm.

Hailey examined the transcoder, a look of awe on his smudged face. He caught Eva’s eye and his face straightened up. “Well, thanks. Thanks a lot, Ella.”

“Eva,” she corrected him, and brushed her bangs out of her eyes. “Eva Nine.”

Hailey regarded her for a moment. “Well, Eva Nine, we won’t be ready to leave until tonight. I suggest you get some REM and gather any belongings you may have. . . . Oh, and don’t forget your Omnipod.” Hailey began to climb back up the ladder.

“My Omnipod? Do I really need it?” Eva picked at her nails.

“Yup,” said Hailey as he continued climbing. “It holds all of your Sanctuary records. It’s the only way you can be admitted as a citizen of New Attica.”

Eva followed Hailey up the ladder. She felt like she was climbing, ascending, toward some answers from her mysterious rescuer. “*New Attica?* Is that the name of the human city? Is it far? What planet is it on? How long will the flight take? What will we do when we get there?”

“Boy, you sure do talk a lot for a reboot. I guess it’s ’cause you don’t know much about stuff,” Hailey said with a laugh as he entered the main deck of the ship.

Somehow the tone of those words stung Eva. “*Reboot?* What’s a reboot?”

“You are,” Hailey replied in a matter-of-fact tone as he sat down in a floating hovchair in the galley.

Eva joined him at the small table and studied Hailey as he devoured another piece of fruit. He ate somewhat slovenly when he ate, just like Rovender. *Muthr would disapprove of his upbringing*, Eva thought.

He continued through a mouth full of food, “You’re Sanctuary-born, right?”

Eva answered with a nod of the head, then tried to appear uninterested. She looked away from Hailey and glanced around the galley. An array of dispensers lined the low walls, each with their synthetic contents labeled: nutriment pellets, Sust-Bar, Pow-R-drink packets, and flavored hydration tablets.

Hailey finished the fruit and wiped his mouth with his sleeve. “So, then, you’re a reboot.”

Eva was quiet. The way he said “reboot” bothered her, but she would not let it affect her.

“And I am a *retriever*,” Hailey continued proudly. “With this ship I track down newly emerged humans and take them to the great city of New Attica, ‘Where a bright and beautiful new future awaits.’ It’s a way out west, but the flight won’t take too long.”

“How did you track me? With my Omnipod?” Eva asked. She felt ignorant, like Hailey knew everything and she knew nothing.

“No.” Hailey got up and approached her. “There’s a tracking chip inside of you.”

“Inside . . . me?” Eva replied. “I don’t think so. Muthr never told me about a—”

“No, it’s true,” said Hailey. Very gently he ran his finger up the nape of Eva’s neck. “The chip is . . . right . . . here.” He stopped at the little raised mole on the back of her neck.

“Heart rate BPM acceleration detected, Eva Nine,” the shoulder patch on Eva’s tunic announced. “Please—” Eva swatted the patch, abruptly shutting it off. Pretending she didn’t hear it, she stepped away from Hailey and entered the cockpit. “Wow,” she said. “This is where you pilot your ship?”

Behind a large domed windshield a single chair sat at an arcing dashboard. Gathered clusters of thin, multicolored wires hung out from underneath the dash like the roots of an overturned tree. On the floor of the cockpit Hailey’s Omnipod displayed a floating hologram of the *Bijou*, labeled as an HRP Company Transcarrier.

“Yeah, this is where I operate the ship.” Hailey leaned against the doorway. “And I can tell you, there’s no feeling like it.”

Eva spun a tracking ball set in the dash. “Is it easy to fly?”

“No,” answered Hailey, gently brushing Eva’s hand away from the dash. “It may look simple, but it takes a long time to master. The controls are very delicate.”

Eva picked up the Omnipod and examined the hologram. The wiring diagram of the ship pulsed like an electronic nervous system. “Is everything okay with the *Bijou*?” she asked.

Hailey took the Omnipod from her. “Yes, of course. I am just doing some . . . refining.” He guided Eva back to the access ladder leading down to the cargo hold. “So, if you and your blue friend want to relax here in the ship, I’ll give you an update later today on our departure time. Just don’t forget your Omnipod.”

Eva turned back. “About that . . . You see, my Omnipod . . . It is, um . . . gone.”

Hailey raised an eyebrow. “Gone?”

“Well . . . yeah.” Eva felt oddly nervous explaining this to him. It was like she hadn’t followed some set of unspoken rules. There was nothing about losing your Omnipod on her survival tests. Though, now that she thought about it, the device did seem integral to all the exercises. She wished Muthr were here to explain things. “You see, Rovee—that’s the blue guy—and me and my Muthr were being followed—hunted—actually—by this big hairy monster, Besteel.”

Hailey crossed his arms. A slight grin drew across his stubbly face. “Go on.”

“Well . . .” Eva didn’t want to talk about this. It was too soon. Too real. She wanted to change the subject. She wanted to leave.

“Hello?” Rovender’s voice echoed up from the hold down below. “Eva Nine?”

“I’m . . . I’m here,” she called down to him. “I’ll be down in a second.” Eva looked back at Hailey. His shaggy bangs concealed one of his deep umber eyes. She felt nervous and giddy. “I don’t have my Omnipod anymore,” she said. “I used it to kill Besteel.”

“Kill him?” the pilot said with a smile. “What, did you throw it at his head?”

Eva’s eyes narrowed. “No. I used it to lure up a sand-sniper, which ate him.” There was venom in her voice.

“Okay, reboot. Whatever you say.” Hailey dismissed Eva and opened up a supply cabinet in the main deck.

“It’s the truth! My Omnipod is lost out in the desert somewhere!” said Eva.

“Well, you better go ask that sand-sniper to give it back to you, because you’ll need it to get into the city.”

Rovender called up from the bottom of the ladder, “Eva, is everything all right?”

“I said I’m fine!” yelled Eva. “What about Rovee? He doesn’t have an Omnipod. He’s never had an Omnipod.”

“Humans need their Omnipods to register in the city.” Hailey continued rifling through the supply cabinet. “I don’t make the rules. I just bring you in.”

“Thanks a lot,” grumbled Eva, and she began to climb down.

“Hey.” Hailey stopped her. “Hold on.” He handed her a tarnished old Omnipod. “It’s an older model that I hacked, and it barely works, but it might help you find yours.”

Eva snatched the Omnipod from him and continued down the ladder.

By the time she crossed the cargo hold, the loud music had resumed. Eva stormed down the ramp and out from under the *Bijou*, with Rovender following close behind.

“Is there something wrong?” Rovender asked.

“I just want to get out of here.”





CHAPTER 2: MOTHER

On the walk back to the campsite, Rovender listened while Eva explained her dilemma.

“So the pilot, Hailey, tells you that you must retrieve your Omnipod in order for you to gain entrance to the human village, New Attica?” he asked.

“Yeah, pretty much.” Eva pouted and kicked rocks out of her way.

“And what is your impression of this other human?” said Rovender as they walked under the broken archway at the entrance of their camp.

Eva gave pause, mostly because she wasn't sure what her impression was just yet. “He's okay, I guess. . . I don't know,” she said, twisting a bead on one of her braids. “I mean, he's here to rescue us and take us to the city, right? But he's also telling me I have to go find my Omnipod buried out there in a sniper-infested desert. Why can't we just leave without it?” She exhaled hotly.

Rovender stopped and lifted Eva's chin. With indigo eyes he studied her. “Eva, I recognize your confusion. It is not always easy to understand another's spirit, especially if you do not know where to look.”

“He looks like a nice guy,” Eva said. “Well, except that he is a bit dirty.”

“No, no, no. That is not what I mean,” Rovender said. “When we first met, I certainly did not know what to make of you. And likely you felt the same about me, correct?”

“You yelled at me and snatched away my Omnipod.”

Rovender grinned. “I admit, I thought the device to be some form of weapon.”

“And you kept telling me how you needed to go and how I was on my own,” said Eva. Her voice became more thoughtful with recollection. “But then you stayed. You helped me. You helped Muthr. I couldn't have survived out here if it weren't for you.”

“So, Eva Nine, you must sometimes disregard what one is *saying* and focus instead on what they are *doing*. Watch and observe. That is when one reveals his true self. Do you understand?”

Eva nodded.

“This Hailey knows the rules of your people. He tells you that he is trying to make it easy for you to become one with the human village.” Rovender continued walking.

“So I just do what he says, then?” Eva asked.

“If your desire is to gain access to this New Attica, then we must trust him until his actions prove otherwise,” Rovender said.

Yes. Maybe he's just eager to leave too, Eva thought, her mind somewhat at ease. *He was awfully busy fixing his ship.* She sat on the wing of Besteel's parked glider and began twirling one of her thin braids around her finger. “But how are we going to find my Omnipod? You saw what happened out there.”

“I understand. All of this makes you upset,” said Rovender.

“I just don't want to go back to that . . . place.” Eva said. Thoughts of Muthr and Besteel's attack bombarded her all at once. “It's too much. I can't.” The braid was wound so tight that her fingertip was red.

Rovender brushed away Eva's bangs. “Have you told Hailey what happened to your Omnipod?”

Eva lied. “No. I didn't want to trouble him. He seemed busy working on his ship.” She wished that Hailey had not said the things he'd said. She wanted him to not think of her as some helpless “reboot.” She wanted to slap her Omnipod into his hand and prove to him how strong, smart, and resourceful she was. But that wasn't going to happen. Her Omnipod was down in the gut of some monstrous sand-sniper.

“You wait here, okay?” Rovender grabbed his walking stick and donned his wide-brimmed hat.

“No, Rovee.” Eva let go of her braid. “Don’t go. It’s too dangerous. You saw the size of that sand-sniper. It’s not worth it.”

“It is worth it to you, so it is worth it to me,” Rovender said, grabbing his bottle of water. “We have until sundown, correct? I will go take a look around and see what clues may be found.”

“And if you come across a sniper?”

“I shall be protected.” Rovender pulled out from the glider’s saddlebag a holster holding a large sonar pistol. He tucked the weapon snug into his belt. “Now you wait here and get some rest.”

Eva handed Rovender his saggy rucksack. “No way are you going out there alone. I’m coming with you.”

“Very well. At least this way I can keep an eye on you.”

Eva strapped her satchel on, her mind turning over what Rovender had said earlier. “Rovee?”

“Yes, Eva Nine?”

“Why did you decide to help me? I mean, how did you know the difference between what I was saying and what I was doing?” asked Eva.

Rovender knelt down in front of her. “Despite what we see and hear, there is a voice that will always be truthful to you,” he replied. Rovender spread an open palm over Eva’s heart. “If you listen from here, you will never be misled.”

The glaring noonday sun baked the sand-worn remains of the ancient city. Rovender and Eva found themselves on the outskirts of the ruins facing endless dunes that stretched out in every direction. The hot breath of gusty wind whipped at Eva, covering her feet in loose granules of ashen sand. Not even the climatefiber in her utilitunic could keep her body cool.

“There is no way on Orbona that we are going to find this thing,” Eva said, rubbing the sand from her eyes.

“Be patient.” Rovender placed his hat on Eva’s head and climbed up onto a large piece of eroded rubble. He peered through his spyglass. “Perhaps luck may pay us a visit.”

Eva stared out into the wasteland. It was like a sea of sand. And, just like the great lake near Lacus, the surface undulated and rolled with the blowing wind.

“Hmmm.” Rovender continued to scan the horizon. “I was hoping for some kind of tracks from Otto’s herd or a sinkhole from the sniper. But all is gone. Buried.”

Eva wiped the sweat from her forehead and sipped her water. She sat on the rubble where Rovender was perched and suddenly recognized its shape and form. He was standing on the rusted carriage of a half-buried hovercraft. It was similar to the old golden hovercraft Eva had piloted over these wastelands. A thought came to her. “Rovee, look for the Goldfish.”

“Yes, yes, yes,” Rovender sang as he scanned the horizon. “Your hover-machine. That is a good idea, Eva Nine. A very good idea. . . . Aha!” He pointed out into the distance. “I see it! The Goldfish is this way.”

The two trudged along in the blistering heat at the edge of the ruins, careful to avoid the open sand dunes where snipers preyed just below the surface. As Rovender and Eva moved closer to the wreck of the Goldfish, Eva felt weird, like she was rewinding a program—a program she wasn’t ready to revisit just yet.

“Oeeah! What have we here?” Rovender knelt down to examine something.

“Is it my Omnipod?” Eva rushed up to him.

“I do not think so.”

Lying before them was a gooey sand-speckled blob about the size of Eva. Strange flies and unusual insects buzzed around it as they lapped up the milky goo that oozed from the cracks of the blob’s dried skin. Rovender jabbed the viscous mass with his walking stick. The end of his stick caught on something inside the blob, and he tugged on it. From the mass came a coiled wire, which Rovender seized with his hand and

began to pull out.

~~“What is that?”~~ Eva winced. ~~Now that Rovender was digging around in the goo, a nauseating stench~~ drifted up amidst the swarm of flies.

“I believe it is a clue,” he replied as he yanked on the coiled wire. Finally, from deep within, he pulled out a familiar artifact.

“That’s Besteel’s boomrod!” Eva said in shock.

“Indeed it is.” Rovender dropped the huntsman’s weapon back into the mass. “It is as I suspected. Snipers cannot digest metal or other similar materials. Do you remember the one near your old home that spit out my bottle?”

“I do.” Eva flinched. “So, is my Omnipod in that?”

“Perhaps.” Rovender wiped his hands on his tattered jacket. “But we’ll have to dig through this spittle to know for sure.”

The disgusting stink wafted back up, whirling around Eva.

“I’m not digging in that.” She wagged her finger at the blob. “I’ll puke.”

“But, Eva Nine, your device may lie in there,” Rovender countered.

Eva brightened and pulled out from her satchel the old Omnipod that Hailey had given her. “Hold on. Perhaps Hailey’s old one can tell us for sure if it’s in there.”

“A good idea,” Rovender said, and dribbled water over his hands to cleanse them.

Eva activated the old Omnipod, and the lights flickered for several long moments before it finally came on.

“Greetings, Van Turner,” the Omnipod said through a static-filled hiss. Eva and Rovender exchanged glances. The device continued, “How may I be of service?”

“Can you locate the whereabouts of another Omnipod?” Eva asked.

“Initiating Techscan,” the device replied. A flickering radar map projected over its central eye. “There is a faint signal approximately ninety meters to the northeast,” it reported. “It carries a trace signal similar to an Omnipod. However, it is too far away to tell for sure at your current coordinates. Please rescan when you are in closer proximity.”

“What about in this glop right here?” Eva pointed the Omnipod’s eye at the mass that held Besteel’s boomrod.

The Omnipod was silent for some time. At last it said, “There is Tech here that I cannot identify. It does not carry the signal of an Omnipod.” Eva put the old device away and looked at Rovender.

“Let us continue,” he said, and set out over the dunes in the direction the old Omnipod had instructed.

As the debris of the ruins became sparser, Eva spotted something glimmering in the sun. The dunes ventured toward a golden fin rising out of the sand like a hologram of a swimming shark.

It was the rudder of the Goldfish.

“We can go no farther until we find out if there are any snipers present,” said Rovender. He began thumping the ground around the wreck with his walking stick. “This vibration will attract them if any are present, but you may also want to use that Omnipod as well.”

Eva crumpled down to the blazing ground next to the golden fin and clutched handfuls of hot sand. One night the entire hovercraft had been almost completely buried in sand, save for the lone tail rudder. However, the events—Muthr’s intercepting Besteel’s lethal shot—were still fresh in Eva’s memory.

Rovender knelt down next to Eva and put his arm around her. “Are you all right?”

“Yeah.” She wiped her eyes with her sleeve. “I just want to get out of here.” She took out the old Omnipod and commanded, “Initiate LifeScan, please.”

The hissy voice of the old Omnipod replied, “Life Scan is inoperative at this moment. Aspects of the

program's database appear corrupted. Please hold while I attempt program analysis and repair."

"Great! That's just great!" Frustrated, Eva threw the old Omnipod back into her satchel. "Doesn't anything work?"

"Patience, Eva Nine," Rovender said, leaning on his stick.

"I'm tired of being patient! I'm tired of waiting!" Now furious, she stomped around the wreckage as the sweltering heat hammered down. It felt as if the sandy ocean itself had been brought to a boil.

"Eva," Rovender called out to her.

She ignored him and continued yelling. "It's all everybody ever tells me. 'Wait for this!' 'Be patient for that!'"

"Eva!" Rovender called out again.

"WHAT!"

"Do. Not. Make. A. Move," Rovender whispered, and pointed behind her.

Eva turned to see an enormous sand-sniper towering overhead. The monster was an impossibly large sand-colored crustacean armed with an arsenal of spiked claws and barbed graspers. At its head two bowl-shaped eyes moved independently of each other amidst an array of corded feelers and paddle-shaped antennae. The sniper was accompanied by its brood of clacking, snapping nymphs.



CHAPTER 3: CLUES

The sand-sniper mother called out loudly with a series of clicks, and the nymphs chirped in response. Slowly, carefully, Rovender drew his pistol and began to charge it. “When I give the word, Eva, you run as fast as you can,” he whispered. “Head straight toward the ruins. It won’t follow you there. And do not look back.”

In a spray of sand another sniper shot up behind Rovender and pinned him down. The pistol fell from Rovender’s grasp and was snatched up by one of the nymphs.

“Don’t hurt him!” Eva called out to the mother sniper. Eva made a move toward Rovender, causing the sniper on top of him to rear up and flex its many graspers.

“It’s a threat display, Eva.” Rovender remained under the sniper, unmoving. “They’re protecting the young. That’s why they haven’t killed us. You have to go now!”

“No. Let me help you.” She took another step toward her friend.

Suddenly, Eva was whisked up several meters off the ground. Immediately she realized she was being held tightly by the graspers of another large sniper that had emerged directly behind her. As the blood rushed through her ears from her pounding heart, Eva fought all instinct to scream or struggle.

“Please don’t kill me!” she called out. The pinpricks of the graspers that held her pierced her tunic and sank into her skin like dozens of long needles. The sniper could crush her as though she were a bug, but for some reason it had not. Eva concentrated on blocking out the pain inflicted by the pincers that held her. She needed to see what the snipers would do now that they had seized control of the confrontation.

The mother sniper’s large eyes rotated independently, watching both Eva and Rovender at once. The monster’s multiple graspers flexed in rhythm to the clacking sounds that emanated from deep within its spiky carapace.

Eva kept her gaze fixed on the mother. She calmed herself and thought out to the monster in the same way that she had communicated with Otto. *Please don’t hurt us, she thought. We are just looking for something that belonged to me—my Omnipod. The clicking device I used to call you up from your home.*

Eva created a mental picture of the Omnipod in her mind. Just like an animated holographic program from her Sanctuary home, she replayed the events of the previous day. Besteel holding Rovender captive atop Otto with his herd close by. Eva throwing the Omnipod into the desert sand while it played the recorded call of a sand-sniper. The mother sniper rising up behind Besteel, skewering him.

One of the sniper’s thick antennae quickly dropped down. It tapped Eva’s head and rose back up. The sniper then called out loudly and opened up every pair of its mighty barbed claws.

Can you help me? Eva held her breath, waiting for some sort of thought response. She could feel a trickle of blood running down her arm. *Once we find it, we will leave you and your babies. I promise.*

One of the nymphs clicked and chirped loudly. The mother sniper turned one eye down toward it and chittered back.

In the nymph’s mouthparts a milky ball, the size of Eva’s head, formed. The nymph spit the ball out toward the sniper that held Eva, and it landed in the sand below. The mother sniper called out again. Slowly Eva was lowered, and the entire family sank back under the sandy dunes. Within moments the wind erased all indication of their presence.

Eva’s legs gave out from underneath her, and she collapsed in the scorching sand. Rovender rushed over and helped her up. “Eva, are you all right?” he said. “We have to go before they return. We will tell Hailey

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