

## **Rescue Mission**

The glaring sun beats down on my back as I exit my transportation pod. I sigh as I plant my feet on the hard dusty ground and look out onto the long expanse of rocky desert. No matter how many times I come here, it never feels possible that this is the same place as the picture albums I loved to look at as a little girl. I feel a lump start to form in my throat and I try to push it back down. It doesn't work. As I start off in the direction that my life detector is pointing, a tear falls onto my metal lab case.

"Come on, Valencia," I tell myself wiping it away, "Get it together. There's nothing we can do now but try to save the ones that are left."

Up ahead, I can see the woolly mammoths grazing in the distance. They really are so beautiful. They're down to just a few spots of dry grassland now. It's hard to believe they were the first ones to be de-extincted so long ago. I remember my great-grandmother telling me how excited everyone was about being able to bring them back, and the aurochs and the quaggas and so many other creatures we'd driven to extinction. They meant well, I guess, but somehow they just didn't think it all through. So much money and time and research to bring a few animals back rather than saving and protecting the millions of animals and habitats they had! How could they have been so blind? I guess they just couldn't imagine the earth would start heating up so fast. Sometimes I try to imagine how things might have been different if they'd paid more attention and put the money and science where we needed them...

My thoughts are interrupted by the outline of a little brown hare resting about ten yards away.

“Gotcha!” I whisper.

I walk toward it as quietly as I can, careful not to cast my shadow across its body and scare it away. But when I reach it, it makes no move to flee. It’s probably too weak from hunger. I kneel down and extend my hand with a few willow flowers. It’s probably been days since it last ate. The willows and other woody plants that once covered these plains are all but gone now.

“It’s hard to believe scientists ever thought the woolly mammoths would be good for the arctic tundra, huh little guy? I mean they did spread the grasses around all right, beating out all the yummy plants you and the other guys needed, huh?” I whisper to the little hare as I pick it up in my arms.

“OK, here goes nothing.” I say.

With my free hand I inject a needle into the hare’s back leg and soon blood is pumping into the vial. I am Valencia Rodriguez, a veterinarian for N.A.2, a rescue organization of scientists, botanists and veterinarians trying to save the few plants and animals we have left. Our base is just a ship like all the other life-sustaining ships most humans have had to retreat to. It can float when the floods come in, but also stand on dry land during the droughts. If necessary, it can fly, but we try not to. The weather patterns are just too unpredictable for a ship our size. With the vial of blood nearly full, I take out the needle and place it carefully back into my medical bag, knowing that my work is done. I tell myself to put the warm little hare down right away, but I can’t. I never can. As the animal slowly fills its lungs with air and exhales, I cradle it closer. Memories flood back of holding my own little miracle baby, and then of helping her walk for the first time, watching her learn to rollerblade, hearing her laugh and sing, and cuddling with her every night before bed. I see my house, my husband, the ocean, and then, inevitably, the hurricane. I can hear the screams and cries of agony, the destruction, the blackness, the death, the

nothing. I lost everything and everyone I loved that day. The tears come again. I can't help it. I know it does nothing to cry but I miss them so much. If only I could pick up my own little girl one more time like this and save her too...

I set the hare down and reach into my bag for some lab-engineered willow plant. I spread it around as much as I can along with some lab-lichen for any caribou or muskox that might still be here too.

"Don't worry, little one," I say to the hare before I turn to go, "It won't be long now until you're reunited with your family again."

As I walk slowly back to my transportation pod, I spot a limping arctic fox in the distance.

"I'm sorry, friend," I whisper, "We already have two of you..."

I climb up into my seat, cast one last glance at the tundra, and plug Noah's Ark 2 into my GPS. The pod is fully charged now from the sun and I know it will be a quick flight home. As I lift off the dusty ground, I try to spot some green, any green, during the flight back to camp, hoping to see good spots where we might be able to study some of the habitats that were once everywhere here. Before I know it, my pod is entering into the ark. I lift up the pod door, jump down, and make my way through the other rows of rescue vehicles waiting for their habitat scanner system checks.

Inside the base, I head straight down to the animal pens. I get out my key card and insert it into the refrigerated vault marked Arctic Tundra. I make my way through animals A-G and then drop the blood of my little arctic hare into its slot. Some day we'll de-extinct these animals when we have the ecosystems and environments that they can live and grow in again... or at least that's the plan, anyway. On days like this, I wonder if I even still believe it. Looking out at

all the thousands of insects and animals in the Arctic Tundra vault alone, I can't help but think that it might all be too hopeful. In the story of the first Noah's Ark, they knew the storm would end some day, and they knew that there would be land again for the plants and animals to grow in, and they knew they'd be able to start again. But our ark has no such hope. We have no idea if we'll ever have a healthy environment again or stable habitats for all our animals, or if we'll ever be able to grow all the right plants and trees again. We might not even be able to grow anything at all, if the storms and droughts never end. I cast one last glance at the drawer where my artic hares are now safely tucked inside.

“Sleep tight, guys,” I whisper, “Tomorrow I go for the lemmings. And who knows, maybe I'll see a dove too.”