



MORGAN RICE

ASCENT

THE INVASION CHRONICLES (BOOK THREE)

The Invasion Chronicles

Морган Райс

**Ascent**

«Lukeman Literary Management Ltd»

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“TRANSMISSION is riveting, unexpected, and firmly rooted in strong psychological profiles backed with thriller and sci-fi elements: what more could readers wish for? (Just the quick publication of Book Two, Arrival.)” --Midwest Book Review From #1 worldwide bestselling fantasy author Morgan Rice comes book #3 in a long-anticipated science fiction series. With planet Earth destroyed, what will become of 13 year old Kevin and Chloe in the mother ship? Will the aliens enslave them? What do they want? Is there any hope of escape? And will Kevin and Chloe ever return to Earth again? “Action-packed .... Rice’s writing is solid and the premise intriguing.” –Publishers Weekly, re A Quest of Heroes “A superior fantasy... A recommended winner for any who enjoy epic fantasy writing fueled by powerful, believable young adult protagonists.” –Midwest Book Review, re Rise of the Dragons “An action packed fantasy sure to please fans of Morgan Rice’s previous novels, along with fans of works such as THE INHERITANCE CYCLE by Christopher Paolini.... Fans of Young Adult Fiction will devour this latest work by Rice and beg for more.” –The Wanderer, A Literary Journal (regarding Rise of the Dragons) Book #4 in the series will be available soon. Also available are Morgan Rice’s many series in the fantasy genre, including A QUEST OF HEROES (BOOK #1 IN THE SORCERER’S RING), a free download with over 1,300 five star reviews!

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# Morgan Rice

## Ascent. The Invasion Chronicles—Book Three

Morgan Rice

Morgan Rice is the #1 bestselling and USA Today bestselling author of the epic fantasy series THE SORCERER'S RING, comprising seventeen books; of the #1 bestselling series THE VAMPIRE JOURNALS, comprising twelve books; of the #1 bestselling series THE SURVIVAL TRILOGY, a post-apocalyptic thriller comprising three books; of the epic fantasy series KINGS AND SORCERERS, comprising six books; of the epic fantasy series OF CROWNS AND GLORY, comprising eight books; of the epic fantasy series A THRONE FOR SISTERS, comprising eight books (and counting); and of the new science fiction series THE INVASION CHRONICLES, comprising four books. Morgan's books are available in audio and print editions, and translations are available in over 25 languages.

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*--Books and Movie Reviews  
Roberto Mattos*

“An action packed fantasy sure to please fans of Morgan Rice's previous novels, along with fans of works such as THE INHERITANCE CYCLE by Christopher Paolini.... Fans of Young Adult Fiction will devour this latest work by Rice and beg for more.”

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*--Books and Movie Reviews, Roberto Mattos*

“In this action-packed first book in the epic fantasy Sorcerer's Ring series (which is currently 14 books strong), Rice introduces readers to 14-year-old Thorgrin "Thor" McLeod, whose dream is to join the Silver Legion, the elite knights who serve the king... Rice's writing is solid and the premise intriguing.”

--*Publishers Weekly*

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## CHAPTER ONE

Kevin stared up in horror at the small ship dragging him and Chloe inside it, feeling completely helpless as it lifted them up with its beam of light. They dangled in the air, turning over helplessly as it drew them up.

It had seemed so certain that they would be able to stop the aliens using the virus they'd taken from the tar pits, but the aliens had sent the vial back empty, almost with *contempt*.

That wasn't the worst part though. The worst part was that Luna was gone. They'd made Luna one of them, and that hurt more than Kevin had thought anything could.

Chloe screamed beside him as they rose, tumbling in air that no longer seemed to know which way was down. Kevin could hear the fear there, but also the anger.

Metal closed around them, and they tumbled together onto the floor of the small ship that had sucked them up. Kevin struggled to stand, bracing himself, half expecting to be attacked by some alien force.

Instead, he found himself standing in the middle of a large, round, white-walled room. There was a circular portal on the floor that looked as though it opened and closed like the aperture of a camera, and nothing else.

Chloe went over to one of the walls and banged a fist on it.

"Kevin, what are we going to do?"

Kevin wished he had an answer. But after everything that had happened down below, he didn't think he had answers for anything anymore.

"I don't know," he said.

Chloe hit the wall again, the thud sounding dull against the interior.

"Chloe, that won't—"

Suddenly, they were standing in thin air. The wall was now as translucent as glass, giving Kevin a clear view of Sedona falling away beneath him, and the larger ship above that they were rising up to meet.

This close, Kevin could see the door—more like a cavernous mouth—open to accept them, letting their ship into what must have been a hangar. There was a ripple of something as they passed into it, some shield or membrane that must have been there to hold its atmosphere in place.

"Incredible," Chloe said with a gasp.

Kevin had to agree. The hangar was large enough for dozens of the ships, all connecting to walkways. Their ship connected to one.

They stopped abruptly, and a section of the wall slid aside, revealing an open doorway.

Kevin and Chloe stared at each other. Why weren't they being greeted? Attacked?

"So they want us to just walk out?" Chloe asked. "Why haven't they killed us yet?"

Kevin wondered that himself.

"Maybe it's a trap," he said.

She started to cry.

Kevin put a hand on her arm. He knew how bad things could get, and he found his thoughts caught between concern for her and worries about what might be happening here. Why were they alone? Why weren't they greeted by the aliens' equivalent of police or soldiers waiting for them?

"Should we walk out?" Kevin asked. "Or stay in here?"

She looked at him.

"Neither option seems safe," she said.

Chloe stepped to the opening, to Kevin's surprise, and he followed. But suddenly she stopped, walking right into something. It was an illusion—a translucent wall that stopped her from walking but allowed her to look out.

Then their small ship starting moving again, slowly, through the massive hangar.

Kevin stepped up beside her and looked out in awe. The hangar was huge and rounded, looking as much grown as built, the walls seeming to pulse faintly with power. But other than the rows and rows of ships, the space was empty.

There were no captured people, no machines working on things, and no aliens.

“Where is everyone?” Chloe asked, echoing his thought.

Kevin didn’t answer, because he was too busy looking back at Earth. Sedona sat below them, seeming so close, yet so achingly far.

“Why aren’t we falling down toward it?” he wondered aloud.

Chloe frowned at him, looked around, and then shrugged. “I don’t know. Maybe the gravity works differently here. I’m kind of glad we aren’t, though.”

Kevin was glad too, because it would have been a really long way to fall. It took him a moment to realize that it seemed to be getting further with every passing moment, receding little by little, the buildings growing smaller until Kevin could no longer make them out.

“We’re still moving!” he said. “We’re going up into space!”

In spite of everything, in spite of the horrors that had been inflicted on the world, and the danger they were probably in, in spite of the fact that they’d failed to destroy the aliens, Kevin had to admit a part of him was excited. The idea of actually going into space was almost too incredible to believe.

“It would be cool except for *where* we’re going,” Chloe pointed out.

Kevin could hear the fear there, and he could even feel some of it himself. If they were heading up, then there was only one place where they could be going, and that would be a dangerous place for them both. The world ship hung above, its rocky surface punctuated by spike-like towers, but almost blank aside from that.

It was frightening, yet the thing was, it might also be their best opportunity to actually *do* something about all of this.

“I know you’re afraid,” Kevin said. “But there’s nothing we can do to stop it. And look at the bright side: we had no way of stopping them back on Earth. Maybe up here we can.”

Chloe scoffed. “How?”

Kevin shrugged. He didn’t know yet. There had to be something. Maybe there would be some way to shut down the things the aliens were doing. Maybe there were ways to drive them off, or fight back against them, or even kill them.

“We have to try,” Kevin said.

He couldn’t help thinking about Luna. What had happened to her was a lot worse than being transported in some alien ship.

They stood there quietly, watching as the Earth grew smaller and smaller beneath them. Soon, it was the size of a watermelon, then a baseball, then a marble against the night sky.

Kevin turned and looked at the mother ship. He hadn’t realized quite how big the alien world was before, and it was only as the craft turned and shifted in space that he got a real sense of how large it was.

“It’s an actual world,” Kevin said, unable to keep the awe out of his voice.

“We knew that,” Chloe said. “It’s been up in the sky.”

“But an actual *world*...”

There was a big difference between seeing something far off and being there. Like the moon, Kevin could have covered up the world ship with the palm of his hand from Earth, but now that they were here, it stretched out as far as he could see in every direction. There were structures on the surface, although most of it looked barren and empty, with only giant towers sticking up from it like the spines of a sea urchin. There were also mouthlike apertures, big enough that even a ship like the one they were on could fit into them without touching the sides. Kevin couldn’t imagine what might have carved gaps like that into a world, but right then they had bigger things to think about.

“I think we’re going into it,” Kevin said. Not just to a world, but inside it, down past the outer shell of its surface.

Chloe didn’t look happy about that. “We’re going to be trapped. We’ll never find our way out.”

“We will,” Kevin reassured her.

He had to believe that. The alternative was that they were heading down to their deaths as the ship that carried them descended into the surface of the world...

...and through it.

Kevin stared. The entire interior of the world ship was like a hollow shell, and inside it there was everything Kevin might have expected on the surface of a planet. There were oceans and landmasses, vehicles moving back and forth, and cities so huge they seemed to take up almost every scrap of available land, turning the whole great ship into one giant hive of activity. Spires stood out from different spots on the vast city, golden and gleaming, looking like palaces set against the rest. A great reddish-gold orb pulsed at the heart of the planet, giving off heat and light.

Kevin thought he could see figures down below, but they were too distant to make out the details yet.

“Aliens,” Chloe said, staring down. “Not people controlled by them, not messages, not their voices... aliens.”

Kevin knew what she meant. All this time, they’d had only hints of the aliens, seen only the effects of what they could do. Now, here they were on the aliens’ world, and there was so *much* of it.

They felt the clunk as the ship that carried them locked into place on the world, steadying their view of a city beyond in which creatures of every impossible shape and size walked at strange angles, seemingly held in place sideways and upside down in defiance of gravity, or maybe they just had control of the gravity, so that any direction could be “down.”

This time, the door opened for real. Kevin could feel the slight breeze on his face, warm and balmy, smelling unlike anything he’d ever experienced.

What surprised him the most, though, was what lay waiting on the other side.

A trio of figures stood there, waiting to greet them.

They were almost identical, which in this place seemed like an impossibility to Kevin. They were tall and hairless, pale-skinned, with eyes that reminded Kevin of a wasp’s, except that they were a pure, milky white. They wore long robes over pale jumpsuits, and each seemed to have an assortment of metal, and occasionally fleshy, devices set around its body.

The one standing at the heart of the trio spoke. Its words came out in English from a translator on its arm, but Kevin didn’t need it to translate the flat monotone. His brain did that for him.

“Welcome, Kevin McKenzie. We have been waiting for you.”

## CHAPTER TWO

Kevin stared at the alien who had spoken, horror flooding through him.

The alien stared back at him with those large pale eyes, and it spoke again while the two others beside it stood silent, the words translating in Kevin's head before the device it held could do it.

"This one is Purest Xan of the Hive," the alien said. "The two beside this one are Purest Ix and Purest Ull. And you are Chloe Baxter and Kevin McKenzie, ape things of the planet Earth."

Kevin was stunned. It took him several moments to collect his thoughts.

"We're humans," Kevin said, wanting to correct them, to talk to them, even to persuade them. After all, they were talking to him in a way that they hadn't bothered talking to anybody else.

"As I said," Purest Xan replied, "ape things. Lesser things, but perhaps things worth learning from."

There was no emotion to the way the alien said it, but there was something about the way it talked about learning from them that sent a shiver down Kevin's spine.

"What do you mean?" Kevin demanded. "What are you going to do to us?"

"Our world ships travel to gather resources," Purest Xan said. "Technology, minerals, minds, bodies we can reshape. We will test you and understand you until you prove worthless. Then we will discard you."

Kevin saw Chloe's face turn pale, and he could share that fear. The thought of being ripped apart for study and then discarded was terrifying.

"We aren't afraid of you," Chloe said, struggling to put a defiant note in her voice.

"Yes, you are," Purest Xan said. "You are a lesser being, with fears and needs, weaknesses and flaws. You are not of the Hive. You are not of the Purest. We have no such weaknesses, only the improvements of our flesh shapers."

"You think you're perfect?" Chloe demanded. "You think looking like *that*, you're perfect?"

"Not yet," Purest Xan said. "But we will be. Enough speaking to lesser orders."

The alien turned to the others with it, and Kevin knew that the next thing it would say was *grab them*.

"Run!" he yelled to Chloe, and they spun away from the aliens, starting to sprint as fast as they could from the square. Kevin ran as hard as his body would let him, ignoring the pain and effort, ignoring the way his illness tried to drag him down with every step and hoping that, if he and Chloe could make enough ground, they might be able to lose Purest Xan and the others with it in the chaos of the world ship.

"Where are we going?" Chloe demanded.

"I don't know," Kevin said. He had no plan right then, no idea what they were going to do next.

He kept running, risking a quick look back to see if the aliens were chasing them. They just stood there, apparently concentrating. One of them touched something on its arm.

Without warning, the world felt heavier. It felt as though heavy weights were pressing down on top of Kevin, too solid to lift. He struggled to keep standing, and saw Chloe doing the same, pushing up against it as if she could lift the sky above her. It wasn't the air, though; it felt as though Kevin's own bones and muscles were too heavy, gravity dragging him down toward the floor many times harder than it should have.

"It's the stuff that lets them stick to the walls," Kevin called out, thinking of the way the aliens had been able to walk sideways and upside down through the interior of their world ship. If they could control gravity well enough to do that, of *course* they would.

Chloe shouted back, "It's dragging me down. We're *trapped!*"

She sounded on the verge of panic, just as she'd been back in the spaceship.

The gravity pulled him down to his knees, the pressure making it hard to breathe. He fell forward, feeling the weight of his own body pinning him down to the floor.

A scream of frustration from Chloe told him that the same thing must have happened to her. It took everything Kevin had just to be able to roll over onto his back and look across to where she lay, pinned in the same way.

“No, let me go! Let me *go!*” she screamed. Kevin could see her crying as she tried to thrash her way clear of the force holding her in place.

The three aliens were there then, and they must have sent some signal to others, because two hulking creatures with carapaces like armor walked out from the golden spire carrying what looked like two large metal frames. They set them down near Kevin and Chloe, standing them upright so that Kevin could see the glasslike sheets set inside them, making them look like two windows standing up on their own.

“Attempting to run was foolish,” Purest Xan said. The alien gave a signal to the two armored creatures, and they reached down to grab Chloe from the floor. As soon as they lifted her, she started to thrash and twist, struggling to get free, but they held her as easily as a feather while she cried.

“Stop it,” Kevin said. “Leave her alone!”

It didn’t seem to make any difference to them. The creatures were as implacable as machines, moving with the kind of strength that said they could have easily torn Chloe and Kevin apart. They took Chloe and lifted her against one of the clear plates, and one of the Purest pressed something on its arm again. Chloe stuck to it as surely as if they’d glued her there, still fighting against it, and still crying when nothing happened.

They came for Kevin then, and big hands clamped around Kevin’s arms, lifting him and pressing him against the second glass panel without giving him any chance to fight. Kevin kicked at them, but his foot just bounced off their armored hides. Then the alien with the device touched it, and Kevin was stuck to the glass just like Chloe.

It didn’t feel like being glued to something, though. There was no stickiness to it. It was more like lying down, except that he couldn’t hope to get up because of the gravity pressing him into place. It wasn’t as strong as on the floor; it was even quite comfortable if he didn’t try to fight it, but Kevin couldn’t hope to pull his way clear of it.

“Kevin,” Chloe said, looking absolutely distraught as she hung there on her own frame.

“I’m right here, Chloe,” he said. He didn’t try to promise her that it would all be okay. That didn’t feel like a promise he could make then. “I’m not going anywhere.”

It turned out that they were both going *somewhere* though, because the large, armored aliens lifted the frames, carrying them like builders moving panes of glass into position. Weirdly, Kevin had no sensation of being lifted, because for him, *down* still felt as though it was toward the frame.

“Where are you taking us?” Chloe demanded. “Let us go!”

“Try to stay calm,” Kevin said, hoping that none of the fear he felt in that moment crept into his voice. He was afraid of what might happen to both of them, but he was really afraid for Chloe. With how much she hated being trapped, this was the worst possible thing that could happen to them.

Except that it wasn’t, and Kevin knew it. There were still plenty of worse things that could happen. *Would* happen, if they didn’t figure out a way out of it.

The aliens carried them toward a golden spire, through a large door that opened automatically to admit them. The interior was everything that the rest of the world ship was not: clean and bright and comfortable looking, so that to Kevin it looked like a very expensive hotel might have, or perhaps a palace. There wasn’t the huge variety of different angles and directions here, either; unlike the rest of the ship, everyone seemed to have agreed on which way was up.

They carried Kevin and Chloe up to a room where dome-shaped banks of machinery stood, looking half-built, half-grown. A section of the wall flickered with an image of the Earth below, and

Kevin didn't know if that had been done simply to stop the walls from being featureless, or as a kind of additional cruelty.

Purest Xan followed them into the room, standing between them, by one of the dome-shaped devices. It took tiny, squid-like things from an opening within the dome one by one, each no bigger than the tip of the alien's finger. Purest Xan placed them on Kevin's head, where they stuck, feeling warm and slimy all at once.

"What is all this?" Kevin demanded. "What are you doing to us?"

"We are going to examine you," Purest Xan replied. "We will see what use you are to the Hive. There will be pain."

It said it as though it was nothing, or at least as though it didn't care. Kevin could hear Chloe crying again now, and he wanted to say something, wanted to comfort her. Then the pain hit, and there was no time to do anything but cry out with it.

It felt like cold fingers rummaging around in his thoughts, picking things up and putting them back again, or maybe it was the tentacles of the things stuck to Kevin's head. He tried to push them out, concentrating as hard as he could, but it made no difference; it just brought more pain.

Kevin could feel other presences now, dozens of minds, hundreds, connected in a kind of silent communion, their collective presence pressing into him and exploring every corner of his being. He heard himself scream, and he heard Chloe too, suggesting that exactly the same thing was happening to her.

Kevin saw images then, flooding into the forefront of his mind and flickering there. There were images of friends, of family, of everything that had recently happened. Kevin saw images of the Survivors jumping into his mind, and he tried to think about something, anything else, so that the aliens wouldn't know where they were. He could feel their lack of interest though; it seemed to make no difference to them.

He started to see other things, the visions flickering through the rest of it, although the truth was that he couldn't tell whether they were real visions or something flowing back along the connection to the Hive's collective. The images filled his mind, blotting out the pain, the sensation of being pinned in place, even the fear of what was happening to Chloe.

He saw a planet floating in space, huge and dull. Moons spun around it, but even as Kevin watched, he realized that they weren't natural moons, but more world ships. He saw one move out of orbit, the space around it bending and shifting as it moved impossibly fast for something that size.

He felt his consciousness being pulled down toward the surface of the planet, and as he reached it, he saw that the surface was blasted and ruined, polluted and inhospitable. There were towns there in spite of that, filled with hunched figures who looked similar to the Purest, but hunched over and changed, their flesh twisted to live in the ruined environment. Kevin found it hard to believe that anyone would want to live in a place like that, but through the connection to the Hive he knew that these figures didn't get a choice. They were the ones not chosen for the world ship.

He saw other things there. He saw the camps of creatures stolen from world after world. He saw the flesh factories where they were tested and reshaped, tortured in way after way, with electricity and fire and more. He saw creatures dissected while alive, or forced to breed with one another in combinations that produced monsters. Among the desolation of the wasted planet, he saw small green domes too, like islands of perfection among the horror of the rest of it. Kevin wasn't surprised to see golden towers standing at the heart of each one.

He came back to himself, gasping, feeling as though every scrap of energy had been pulled out of him. Kevin lay on the platform, looking around and seeing only Chloe in the room now. It felt as though the visions had only lasted seconds, but it must have been longer, to give Purest Xan enough time to leave the room.

"Chloe?" Kevin said.

He heard her groan, her eyes opening as she looked over at him. They were red with crying now as she stared over at him.

“I saw... I saw...”

“I know,” Kevin said. “I saw it too.”

“They’re going to kill us,” Chloe said. “They’re going to pull us apart to see how we work. They’re going to experiment on us like some little kid pulling the wings off flies.”

Kevin would have nodded if he could have pulled his head away from the frame enough to do it. That was the problem, though: they could talk about how much they needed to get out of there, they could see everything that was going to happen, but they still couldn’t move. All they could do was stay there, staring at the screen in front of them, and the Earth rotating slowly upon it.

It took a second or two to realize that it was getting smaller.

It was gradual at first, the planet shrinking away a little at a time. Then it started to move faster, and faster still, receding until it was just a dot. Then it wasn’t even that as the space around the world ship folded around it and it shot away through space.

Kevin stared at the screen in horror. He didn’t know where they were going, or why, but whatever could persuade the aliens to move their whole world ship from the Earth, he knew that it couldn’t be good for him and Chloe.

Or for Luna.

## CHAPTER THREE

Luna fought. With every scrap of energy she could find, she tried to fight back against the immobility creeping through her body, making her slow, making her stop. She stood in the middle of Sedona, at the heart of a group of controlled people, and her mind screamed with the effort of trying to keep herself from becoming like them.

It felt as though her body was turning into stone, or... no, more like her limbs were going to sleep while inside she was still awake. She couldn't feel her fingertips, but she kept on fighting. She could feel herself slipping into the controlled state, though, becoming more and more of a prisoner in her own body with every passing second. It felt as though she was trapped behind glass, her personality and her ability to control herself an exhibit in some museum made from her own flesh and bones.

The world even *looked* as though she was looking through a kind of strangely filtered glass, colors shifted so that all the ones Luna expected had a milky opacity to them, and new ones crept in around the edges of her vision. Luna didn't need a mirror to know that her pupils would be a vivid white by now, and she *hated* it.

*I will keep fighting, she told herself. I won't give up. Kevin needs me.*

In spite of her determination, it was hard to ignore the fact that her arms and legs wouldn't do what she ordered them to. Luna was just standing there, the same as all the others waiting in Sedona, as still as an unused puppet, unable to do more than blink and breathe by herself.

Luna fought to do more. She focused on the smallest finger of her right hand, willing it to straighten. It seemed to move aching slowly, but it moved. It moved! She tried to move the next finger, focusing on each joint, each muscle...

She screamed inwardly when nothing happened.

At least Kevin had gotten away. Luna had seen him make it through the ranks of the controlled and get to one of the ships. She'd seen him and Chloe sucked up into one of them too, and that made Luna worry more than anything that was happening to her.

*You have to fight, she told herself again. Kevin is stuck on an alien spaceship without you. You know he'll just get into trouble on his own, and not even the fun kind.*

Of course, Kevin wasn't on his own, but that thought didn't make things better. It wasn't that Luna hated Chloe or anything, but it was pretty obvious that she liked Kevin, and... well... so did Luna. It was weird how that was easier to admit when her mind was busy being taken over by aliens, but it was, maybe because she knew no one else would find out.

She'd tried making it obvious to him plenty of times in the past, although he never seemed to *get* it. Maybe that was a boy thing, or maybe it was just a Kevin thing, able to understand messages from across the galaxy, but not anything right in front of his face. Now he was up on an alien spaceship with Chloe, and if they weren't exactly alone together, Luna was pretty sure that aliens didn't count. Even if nothing happened, Luna still wasn't sure that Chloe was a good choice to get Kevin back safely. Yes, she'd helped save Luna on the boat, and she could hotwire a car, but that wasn't the same thing as hijacking a spaceship, and Luna didn't trust her not to panic when things went wrong.

Then things *did* go wrong, and Luna had a perfect view of it.

One moment, the aliens' world ship was hanging moon-like in the sky; the next, the sky around it rippled and flickered, as though space was a pond that someone had thrown a stone into. The world ship started to drift away, its shadow passing from the sky. There was a moment when the space it was in seemed to fold around it, and then it was gone, moving far faster than Luna could hope to follow.

For a brief moment, hope flared in her. Was it over? Kevin had gone up into the small ship above Sedona, and that had gone up to the world ship, and now both were gone. Had he found a way to end this? Had he and Chloe saved them all?

Luna tried to move her arm, hoping against hope, but nothing happened. Nothing had changed.

A bark beside her caught Luna's attention. Bobby was there, the Old English sheepdog running up to Luna and nudging against her leg in a way that might almost have knocked her over if he had done it before the controlled breathed their vapor into her. As it was, she stood as solid as stone, unmoved and unmoving, not even reacting as he moved to her hand, licking her with a big, rough tongue.

*Good boy*, Luna thought, and tried to say it, but she couldn't get the sounds out. She couldn't reach out to pet him either, and that just showed her how much control the aliens still had over her. Bobby nudged against her again and then ran back as if expecting her to follow, and when she didn't, he lay down and whined, looking up at her with sad eyes.

*I'm sorry, Bobby*, Luna thought, but she couldn't say that, either.

It wasn't the only thing she was sorry for. Around her, Luna could see the Dustside bikers standing just as still as everyone else. She could see Bear hulking over the rest of them, all of the sense of strength and command leached out of him by his transformation. She could see Cub just a little way away, the boy staring back at her blankly, where before he'd been confident and obviously interested in her.

*Are you still in there?* Luna wondered in the prison of her mind. Was everyone who had been transformed trapped like this? Were they sitting there behind the pure white of their pupils, horrified as the aliens controlled every movement they made? Luna didn't know whether to hope that Cub wasn't having to suffer that, or to hope that he was, because at least it would mean that he was still there, and at least there might be a chance to get him back.

*What chance?* Luna thought. What hope was there for any of them? No one had come back from this so far. The aliens had transformed most of the world, and the people who got transformed stayed transformed. It wasn't like liking the wrong band; it wasn't as if it simply wore off if you left it long enough.

She could hear sounds now, deep in the back of her mind. She recognized the screeches and the clicks, the static sounds and the buzzing, because she'd heard them plenty of times before when Kevin had been translating alien signals. Luna could hear this as their language, although she still had no idea what it meant.

*She* might not know it, but it seemed that her body did. Luna found herself starting to move, forming up with the other people there like some kind of military unit. She didn't know who was giving the orders if the main alien ship was gone. Maybe some of the aliens were down on the surface.

It didn't matter; whoever was giving the orders to her, Luna found herself obeying them. She started to march with the others, spreading out with them among the debris of Sedona, starting to lift rubble and pick through the houses.

Luna felt like she was watching it from a distance, seeing herself lifting rocks and pulling at sections of wood with her bare hands. She saw herself moving in concert with Cub and the others, picking the town clean with the thoroughness of ants cutting leaves or vultures stripping a carcass of meat.

She heard Bobby barking again, and he was beside her once more, yapping and running around her as if he might be able to distract her from what she was doing. He licked her hand again, then clamped his teeth down on her arm. It wasn't hard, more like the way he might have held onto a wayward puppy and pulled it back into line.

Bobby was strong, and probably weighed almost as much as her, but Luna pulled clear of him as if he wasn't there. She kept working, gathering materials and forming them into piles, sorting them as efficiently as a machine.

Luna saw cuts and scrapes appear on her arms from the effort of moving the materials, but she didn't feel them. They were as numb as if she had left them in ice for an hour, the pain insulated from her by the layers of alien control.

Luna could feel that control now as Bobby continued to bark and run around her. She could feel what it wanted her to do, and she fought it, the small part of her that was still *her* horrified by the prospect even as the rest of her picked up a rock.

*No!* she commanded herself. *I won't do it. I won't do this!*

She fought against the impulses with every fiber of her being, pulling back at her arm with the full strength of a will that had previously stood up to everything from parents' instructions to the raging ocean. For a moment or two, it felt as if she was even able to make her body hesitate, frozen on the brink of action. It was too much, though, like trying to hold back the weight of an avalanche with her bare hands. With an inner cry of despair, Luna felt that avalanche pour over her.

She turned and threw the rock at Bobby, crying as she did it.

He yelped, then whined as he hurried away, limping slightly on one paw. Luna saw him retreat to the edges of the buildings they were working on, lying down and watching her with a forlorn look that matched how Luna felt only too well.

But what she felt didn't matter, not in the face of the aliens' instructions. No matter how much her mind crashed against the limits of the cage that held it, the prison of her body kept working, lifting and tearing, separating resources and stacking them ready for collection even though the ship above Sedona was gone now.

She tried to count the minutes that passed, tried to keep some track of the time that was ebbing away, but there was no easy way to do it. Her body kept her eyes on the work, not on the progress of the sun, and if she got hungry or tired, she didn't feel it. In the deepest recesses of her mind, Luna understood now how the controlled were so fast and strong: they didn't care about the pain or the tiredness that would have stopped most ordinary people; where most people stopped well short of the limits of what their bodies could do, the controlled were pushed to those limits all the time by the aliens who commanded them.

*Who command us,* Luna corrected herself.

She didn't want to think of herself as one of them, but Luna wasn't sure how to distract herself from any of it. She couldn't shut her eyes to block it out. She couldn't stop herself from doing any of this. The most that she could do was try to grasp for memories of her life before this: sitting with Kevin on the shore of the lake when he'd told her about his illness, going to school and... and...

She latched onto a memory, thinking about one day when she'd been due to meet up with Kevin after school. They'd planned to go down to a pizza place on the corner not far from their houses. She could remember the feeling, what it had been like walking through their town, heading for a spot that had been just theirs, that no one else had known about, behind one of the wooden fences that surrounded an old house a little way along that no one had lived in for years.

Getting there meant clambering through the fork in the old tree that kept a gap clear among a stack of old junk, then running along the boards of a low roof in *just* the right pattern that her feet wouldn't fall through, all the while making sure that no one who might shout at her for being somewhere she shouldn't be saw her.

In other words, it was exactly the kind of route that Luna loved to run along. She made her way along it with the kind of speed and willingness to get muddy that would probably have made her parents sigh if they saw it. While she ran, she found herself thinking about Kevin, wondering if today would be the day when he got around to asking if he could kiss her.

Maybe he wouldn't; he could be pretty oblivious about things sometimes.

She made her way through the gardens, over toward the spot where she and Kevin were due to meet. She heard a noise from beyond the fence, and saw Kevin and a couple of other boys she hadn't seen before.

"What are you doing back here?" one asked. "Hiding away so no one can find you?"

"I'm not hiding," Kevin insisted, which Luna guessed was just about the worst thing he could have done.

“Are you saying that I’m a liar?” the boy demanded. He pushed Kevin, so that Kevin scraped back against the wall. “Are you calling me a liar?”

Luna slipped through the gap in the fence. “I am,” she declared. “I’m saying that you’re a liar, and a bully, and if you give me a couple of seconds, I’ll probably think of plenty of other nasty things to call you too.”

He spun toward her. “You’d better run. This is between me and him.”

“And your friend, let’s not forget that,” Luna said.

“You’re being smart because you think I won’t hit a girl! Well—”

Luna punched him in the nose, as much because she was getting bored waiting for him to actually do something as anything else. He roared and set off running after her as Luna sprinted away.

She didn’t lead him back the way she’d come, because that was *her* route, but she knew plenty of others. Just for fun, she cut across the garden where they always had their pool filled, hearing a splash as one of the boys missed his turn. From there, she scrambled up onto one of the nearby roofs, then over through the park, then across into the garden where the big, angry dog lived, taking care to only step in the spaces out of range of its chain. A snarl and a shriek of anger behind Luna told her that the second of the boys had fallen behind.

“I’ll get you for this!” he yelled out.

Luna laughed. “Not unless you want to have to explain to people how I managed to punch you and get away with it.”

She ran back in the direction of Kevin, who was waiting there with the confidence of someone who’d seen this game before.

“You know, I could have taken him,” he said, trying to look tough.

Luna managed not to laugh. “But it’s more *fun* this way. Come on, you can buy me pizza for rescuing you.”

“But you didn’t rescue me. I could have taken him...”

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Luna smiled at the memory, or would have if she’d been able to move her face. She tried to think of the bully’s name, because she was sure that she’d known it once. What bully though? What had she been thinking about? The fact that she couldn’t remember made Luna pause in terror. She’d been thinking about it just a moment ago, and now it was gone, like... like...

Luna tried to grasp the memories, she really did. She knew that she *had* memories; a whole lifetime’s worth. She had friends, and a life, and parents... she definitely had parents, so why couldn’t she remember their *faces*? Maybe she didn’t have parents. Maybe all of this was just some sick joke. Maybe she’d always been like this, and she was just defective somehow, feeling that she was different as a distraction from the work that the aliens needed her to...

*No, Luna thought fiercely, I’m me. I’m Luna. They transformed me, and I have real memories... somewhere.*

She wasn’t sure where, though. Every time she tried to grab for what felt like the beginnings of a memory, it slipped away into a great fog of thoughts that felt as though it was consuming every part of her. Luna tried to drag herself away from that fog, but it was creeping in more and more around the edges of who she was, seeming to fill everything, carrying away small pieces of memories, of words, of personality.

Suddenly, she saw something. It was just different enough to snap her out of it, even if just for a second.

There was a man approaching. Moving forward without fear. A real man. Not controlled.

*How could that be?*

Where Luna and the others moved with an almost mechanical synchronization, he moved forward in furtive little darts and stutters, with what looked like some kind of gun cradled in his arms.

He didn't look like a soldier, though. He looked more like a pirate, crossed with a professor. His hair was wild and spiked, while half a dozen earrings dotted one ear, and he had the beginnings of an unkempt beard. He was wearing a tweed jacket and button-down shirt over jeans and hiking boots. He *wasn't* wearing a mask, which made no sense at all.

Luna moved to meet him, her hands coming up to grab for him fast enough that he couldn't even begin to jump back, or maybe he just didn't want to try. Even though he was a grown-up and she was just a kid, she had enough strength to hold him in place while her mouth opened wide and then wider still, a great cloud of vapor seeming to boil up in her throat as if waiting to be released. Feeling almost guilty, she breathed it out toward the man, enfolding him in a cloud of vapor thick enough to leave him coughing.

Luna stepped back, the aliens who controlled her obviously waiting for him to transform. He stood there, though, lifting the gun he held, and Luna felt a rush of fear. She might not feel pain, but she was pretty sure that if someone did enough damage to her, she would still be able to die. For a moment, she found herself hoping that the vapor she'd breathed out would take hold before he got a chance to fire. She didn't want to die. Then she felt guilty for even thinking that. She shouldn't wish this on anyone.

But the gun did not fire.

Instead, a cloud of blue-green vapor came out of the barrel, pouring into Luna's lungs with every breath. She started to reach out for him to snap his gun in half, and probably to do the same to him, but the strangest thing happened when her arms were less than halfway to him.

She stopped.

In a single moment, she froze in place, her heartbeat coming faster and faster. She felt her whole world spinning.

Luna fell to her knees involuntarily. She felt them scrape on the sidewalk, actually *felt* it, and the sensation coming back was like when blood rushed back in after an arm or a leg had gone to sleep. It hurt and she cried out.

She couldn't believe it.

She was back.

Back to her old self. No longer controlled.

She dug down into her memories, making sure they were still there; that they hadn't been lost completely. She pictured Kevin's face, and her parents as they had been on the first birthday she could remember. She breathed a sigh of relief, and not just for herself. It meant that the people who had been transformed weren't lost.

She wanted to shriek with joy. To reach out and hug this man and never let go.

She stared up at him in wonder.

He smiled down in a curious, academic way.

"My," he said, "you seem to be responding much quicker than the other subjects I've tried this on. Oh, forgive me, where are my manners? I'm Ignatius Gable. The vapor you just breathed in is the vaccine I created to counter the effects of the alien control. You should feel complete control returning to you shortly. Now, I'm sure you have a lot of questions about what's going on, but we're not exactly in a position to chat here. So unless we both want to get killed for good, I suggest you come with me."

She blinked back, startled, and followed his gaze to see countless controlled closing in.

"NOW!" he shouted.

The controlled started to descend on them in a swarm. Luna could only watch as they crowded in close, grabbing for them. He sprayed them with his gun, but for the others, it didn't seem to work.

Luna ran forward, plunging into the crowd and slipping through the spaces with every advantage she could get from being smaller than most of the people there. She ducked under arms and skidded between legs, taking Ignatius's arm and not letting go.

Luna spotted Cub, and Bear, and the rest of them, and she snatched the gun and whirled around.

“What are you doing?” he cried out in alarm.

She sprayed a cloud of it that started to slow the controlled around her, spraying Cub and Bear and all the rest of them.

“Come on,” she said, as she kept her finger down on the trigger. “Change!”

Luna saw Cub blinking in the sunlight, stretching out his hands and staring at them.

She looked around until she saw Bobby in the shadows of a building and held out a hand to him.

And then she turned with the others and ran.

And didn't stop running.

## CHAPTER FOUR

Kevin recoiled when Purest Xan came into the room that held him and Chloe. Hanging there alone and unattended was bad enough, but somehow he knew it wouldn't be as bad as anything the alien chose to do now.

"Fear is a weakness," Purest Xan said, the words coming out a moment later through its translator. "Just one of many we have conquered."

"What do you mean?" Kevin asked. He tried to hold back the fear he felt too, because he didn't want the alien to see it now.

Chloe looked scared enough for both of them, but she looked angry too. If the twisted gravity hadn't been there, holding them to the frames, Kevin suspected that she would have tried to attack the alien.

"Once, we were as weaker beings," Purest Xan said, making a gesture so that a section of wall shifted into a screen that showed things that were like the Purest and not like them, all at once. They weren't quite smooth-skinned, weren't quite as graceful or as perfect looking, and certainly didn't have the sense of cold implacability that the Purest had. They looked like the kind of things the Purest might have been a long, long time ago.

"We fought and we warred with one another. We turned our home world into a place that was almost unlivable with the weapons we used."

The image on the screen shifted, showing a world that started out green and beautiful, only for all of that plant life to wither and die, and explosions to ripple across the surface, with fire and tearing winds spreading out in ripples from what looked like the heart of cities.

"We had to find ways to adapt."

"By attacking other people's worlds," Kevin said. "By tricking us into letting you in so that you could take over people's minds."

"You're evil," Chloe added. "You're nothing but monsters."

Purest Xan looked at them without a hint of emotion. Kevin doubted that the creature was capable of them, and in some ways that was scarier than if Chloe had been right. These creatures weren't malicious, or filled with hate, or determined to wipe out everything they feared. They acted as coldly and calmly as a glacier rolling over a town, not caring about the lives within.

"Your worlds do not matter," Purest Xan said. "You are not of the Hive. You are not of the Purest."

"You really think you're the only things that matter in the universe?" Chloe demanded.

"We are the Purest," Xan replied, as if that answered everything. "We created the Hive to solve the wars of our world. In coming together, we learned to put ourselves beyond the weaknesses of emotion. We learned from the worlds nearest us how to transform the lesser to be all that we require them to be. We built the Hive ships to carry us and gather materials with which to regenerate our world for the Purest."

"So you just take and take, and give nothing back," Kevin said.

"All else is lesser," Purest Xan said. "All is ours."

"Until we stop you," Chloe said, struggling against the gravity that held her. If it felt anything like the shifted gravity that held Kevin in place, he knew that she had no chance of breaking free, but he guessed that telling her that wouldn't persuade her to stop. If anything, it would probably make things worse.

"You are weak. You cannot stop the Hive," Purest Xan said.

"Then why are we still here?" Kevin asked. "If you think we're so weak and useless, why didn't you have us killed the moment we arrived on your... ship?"

"We do not destroy what is useful," Purest Xan said. "We gather it. It is our purpose."

Useful. Kevin wasn't sure he liked the idea of being useful to something like this. From what he'd seen of the other creatures they had found useful, the aliens went around reshaping their flesh, transforming them. He'd already felt the pain involved just with the aliens going through his thoughts. The visions he'd seen of the aliens' world had been even worse.

"I don't want to be useful to you," Kevin said.

"You get no choice," Purest Xan said. "You should be grateful to us. The chosen of a world are typically destroyed, to stop them being... a danger to us. You survive because we permit you to survive."

"Why?" Kevin insisted.

Purest Xan didn't answer for a moment or two. Instead, the alien moved around the room, making adjustments to some of the machinery.

"They're going to look in our minds again, Kevin," Chloe said, sounding terrified by the prospect. "They're going to use those tentacle things again."

"Not on you," Purest Xan said, sounding almost contemptuous. "You will be intriguing enough to dissect and reshape. Your mind is quite interesting, but you are not worthy of more."

"You can't dissect Chloe!" Kevin yelled, fighting against the gravity that held him. It pressed him back into the frame easily, no matter how much he struggled to break free. The pressure held him flat, like a lead weight pressing down on his chest.

"We may do as we wish," Purest Xan said. "If that is the greatest use the female can be to the Hive, that is what will happen. We will be generous, though. You will get to choose what happens to her."

"Then I choose that she doesn't get dissected!" Kevin said.

"After we are done," Purest Xan said. "After you have joined our Hive."

"What?" Kevin said. He shook his head. "No way."

The alien moved to him, the tentacled devices ready in his hands.

"Your brain has capacities that the Hive requires," Purest Xan said. "Therefore you will join us."

The alien made it sound like an undeniable fact, as if it was simply the way the world was. It made the idea sound as obvious and natural as water being wet, or as the sun being hot. There was nothing natural about the tentacled *things* that Purest Xan held in its hands, though.

"So, what?" Kevin demanded, mostly because every moment he could delay this felt like a good idea. "You're going to make me into one of the Purest like you? Do I get to lose all of my hair and have freaky eyes?"

Maybe if Kevin could annoy the alien enough, he could distract it from what it was about to do. Of course, it might then decide to do a whole host of things that were even worse, but right then, Kevin couldn't *think* of anything worse than being changed into one of them.

"You are not of the Purest," Purest Xan said. "But you can be made of the Hive. You will become our emissary, one of *our* chosen. You should welcome the honor."

"You think it's some kind of honor for Kevin to have his brain invaded?" Chloe demanded.

"It will not be an invasion," Purest Xan said. "Kevin will welcome us. He will *agree* to become one of us."

"Why do I have to agree?" Kevin demanded. "Why don't you just do it if you're going to, instead of playing games?"

The alien looked almost offended by that, although Kevin doubted that it could feel that emotion either. He doubted that it could feel anything.

"We do not play games," it said. "Your species' brains are delicate, though, and we require yours intact for the tasks that the Hive has for you. If you fight too much during the process, there is the potential that you could be... damaged."

"I'll fight you," Kevin promised. "I'll die rather than do anything to help you."

The alien stood there staring at him, apparently not comprehending what he had just said. It frowned at Kevin slightly, tilting its head to one side as though listening to something only it could hear. Kevin got the feeling that it was trying to make sense of him, and trying to work out what to do while it did so.

“Your statement is foolish,” Purest Xan said. “Yielding is to your advantage. You get to continue to exist.”

“I’m dying anyway,” Kevin said, thinking about the moment when the doctor had diagnosed him with his illness, had told him just how little time he had left to live. “Do you think I care about threats?”

The alien stared at him for another moment or two, and again, Kevin had the sense of it getting advice from the others of its kind.

“We can save you,” it said, dropping the words there like lead weights.

The shock of that ran through Kevin like ice water. The best scientists Earth had to offer had tried and failed to help him. Now here the aliens were, offering to make him well as if it were nothing.

“You’re lying,” he said. He had to believe that they were lying. “You already lied about so much, do you think I’m going to believe this?”

He thought about all the ways they’d lied to get him to help with their invasion of the Earth. They’d told him that they were refugees seeking the safety of another planet. They’d told him that they were the ones fleeing destruction, rather than causing it.

“You have seen what we can do,” Purest Xan said. “We can manipulate flesh in ways your human mind cannot imagine. The Purest of the Hive are preserved almost indefinitely. We have every reason to want you alive. We could heal you, if you were of the Hive.”

What could Kevin say to that kind of temptation? It was everything he had wanted from the moment the doctor had told him what was happening. When he’d been at the NASA institute, he’d secretly hoped that one of the scientists there might find some way to help him, to make all the shaking and the pain stop. He’d thought that he would give almost anything to be well again. It took almost everything Kevin had to shake his head.

“If I have to die to stop you getting what you want, then that’s what I’ll do,” Kevin said. He meant it. He wanted to live, he’d hoped for a cure, but by now, he’d had plenty of time to accept what was going to happen to him. If dying could help to stop the aliens... well, he didn’t *want* to, but he would.

“And what about the other things the Hive can offer?” Purest Xan said. “We are told that your species values parents and friends. As one of us, you could decide what was done with those we controlled.”

Kevin swallowed, thinking of his mother, thinking of Luna. There were so many people he knew back on Earth, so far away that it was no longer visible on the screen. If he could help them... no, if the aliens wanted something from him, that wouldn’t help them at all.

“Then there is the question of your friend here,” Purest Xan said. “As this one has said, as one of the Hive, you could determine what happens to her. If you do not do this, the female will be experimented on while you watch.”

Kevin froze, looking from the alien to Chloe and back.

“No, Kevin. Don’t do it,” Chloe said. Kevin could hear the desperation there. “Let them kill me. Do whatever it takes!”

Kevin could hear the sincerity in her voice, but... he couldn’t do it. He couldn’t stand there and watch while Chloe died. He knew that they would do it. There was something about the cold, emotionless way Xan made its threat that made it something else. Not a threat exactly, more a simple statement of what would happen.

“We will change you anyway,” Purest Xan said. “It is simply a question of how much you fight, and how much it hurts. Make your decision, Kevin McKenzie.”

“Fight them, Kevin,” Chloe said. “Don’t give in!”

Kevin looked at her, trying not to think of all the things the aliens might do to her. It was impossible, though, to do anything but picture what might happen once they started to experiment on her. Could he really stand by and watch if they started to take her apart to see how she worked, or started to transform her into something that wasn’t human? Could he do that, when all it would mean was that they would transform him by force?

He couldn’t, and he knew it.

“Okay,” he said, hating every moment while he did it. “Do it.”

“We were always going to,” Purest Xan assured him. “This will hurt more, the more you struggle.”

“Kevin,” Chloe said. “Please fight it. You have to stay yourself. You have to stay strong.”

That, Kevin guessed, was the only hope here. They couldn’t break free. They couldn’t fight back physically. The only chance was to join with the Hive, and somehow hope to retain enough of himself...

He didn’t even finish that thought before Purest Xan applied the tentacles to his skull, and the Hive lanced invisibly into his brain.

Kevin cried out with the pain, swift and sudden, like an icicle being stabbed into the depths of his mind. He’d thought that he was used to pain; with his illness, he’d thought he’d known what pain was, but now he realized that it was nothing compared to what was happening now. He could feel the tentacles questing through his thoughts and his memories, the unpleasant sensation far too familiar from when the aliens had first probed his mind.

This was different, though, because the aliens weren’t just looking this time.

Kevin could feel the Hive inside his thoughts, mind upon mind, interlinked and powerful. It was hot and cold and painful all at the same time. It felt like ground glass being worked through his thoughts. He could feel the wash of the controlled on the far fringes, not even a true part of the whole. He could feel the sharp-edged minds of things bred for war, and the softer, slower thoughts of beasts of burden. Then there were the Purest and their servants, shining strands against the web of the rest.

*Come to us*, they urged, the voices deep and seductive. *Become us*.

Kevin tried to pull away, and the effort hurt more than he could have imagined. He heard himself scream, but the sound seemed to come to him from far away. It was like claws holding him in place, hooked into his brain, too powerful to ignore.

Even so, Kevin fought. He could feel the Hive moving through him, taking over parts of his mind the way an invading army might take over fields and towns. Kevin started to hide parts of himself, remembering the way he’d tried to hide how scared he was for his mother’s benefit, trying to hide away whatever he could while the aliens continued to push forward within his mind. If he could do it enough, he might be able to hold himself separate from the Hive. He might still be himself.

He felt the moment when they linked him to the Hive, going from seeing all the separate strands to being one of them. He could hear the messages and the thoughts of the others there, the commands of the Purest and the obedience of the rest.

*A mind that picks things apart*, one of the Purest thought in his direction.

*A mind that is everything we need*, another agreed.

Kevin could feel Purest Xan’s presence beside him. *Wake, Kevin, join your new life*.

Kevin’s eyes snapped open, and he couldn’t remember closing them. The world around him looked strange, cloaked in a sheen of new colors, details he would never have noticed before coming to his eyes. It was as if he could focus on every mote of dust and fraction of color change.

He looked around at the machines, and the Hive within him told him what each was for. Had he succeeded in holding back some part of himself? Kevin didn’t know. He still *felt* like himself, although everything else about the world seemed strange. It seemed both more alive and more connected than he could have ever imagined.

Purest Xan moved to him, working the controls on the frame. The alien operated them, and Kevin felt the gravity that was holding him in place shift back toward the floor.

“Welcome to the Hive, Emissary Kevin,” Purest Xan said.

## CHAPTER FIVE

Luna and the bikers ran from the controlled as they closed in, lunging for their bikes, trying to make it to them before the greater speed of those the aliens controlled brought them too close. Luna ran toward the spot where her own bike had stopped, lying on its side now with the sidecar up in the air, obviously overturned in whatever chaos had followed the moment when they'd grabbed her.

She struggled to right it, shoving her entire body against it, the weight of it making it feel as though she was pushing against a solid wall. Luna felt it shift slightly as she kept pushing, and then it toppled, raising a small cloud of dust as it hit the ground beside the road.

"Get in, Bobby," she called to the dog, who was still busy growling at the advancing horde of controlled as if he might be able to fend them off. "Hurry!"

She pointed to the sidecar, and the dog got the message, hopping into it and sitting there, looking around with his teeth bared. Looking back, Luna could see why: the controlled were getting closer, running in that way that put them far closer than they should have been every time she blinked. Luna went to start the bike, determined to put as much distance between her and the controlled as possible...

It wouldn't start.

"Not now," Luna said through gritted teeth as the engine coughed and spluttered. "Come *on!*"

She jumped her entire weight on the kick-starter once, then again. She could see the controlled getting closer now, so that they were twenty yards away, then ten. Luna could feel the fear building in her. She really didn't want to know what the controlled would do to someone who wasn't one of them anymore.

She jumped on the starter once more, throwing her whole weight down onto it, and the bike roared into life. Luna didn't hesitate, accelerating as hard as she dared away from the onrushing crowd of controlled people. She felt the heaviness as an unfeeling hand clamped onto her bike, a woman with unseeing white pupils holding on tight enough that the bike dragged her along, making her skid along the ground when even her enhanced speed wasn't enough to keep up.

Luna found herself trying to remember if she'd seen this woman while they'd all been forced to work. She found herself thinking about the person who might still be trapped somewhere behind those eyes, the person who might be fighting to stop herself even as she reached for Luna. Luna knew exactly how bad it was to be one of the controlled now, and she knew that there was nothing the person in there could do to stop themselves.

On the other hand, she knew that they didn't feel pain.

"Sorry," Luna said, kicking out at the woman from her perch on the bike until the controlled woman tumbled back onto the road, letting Luna's bike shoot forward fast enough that she had to cling to it tightly so she didn't fall off.

Around her, Luna saw the members of the Dustsides Motorcycle Club grabbing their bikes and pulling away in formation, the bikes forming a broad V shape as if they might be able to smash through anything that got in their way. She saw Ignatius jump onto the back of Bear's bike, still clutching his precious vapor gun.

There were more controlled coming out of side streets now, lunging for the bikes from every direction. The only hope seemed to be to keep going as fast as possible, hoping that sheer speed would carry them past the mass of the controlled before they could close in on them like water pouring into a basin. Luna was fine with going faster. Being scared of the sheer speed was definitely better than thinking about the prospect of being torn apart by the controlled.

"Don't stop!" Luna called out to the others, as loud as she could so that it would carry over the noise of the bikes. "We need to get away."

They kept riding, as fast as possible. With the controlled approaching from the back and the sides, their bikes popped out of the mass of them like a cork from a bottle. In an instant, they were in clear space, hurrying through Sedona, trying to get as far from the onrushing horde of controlled as they could. They were moving faster than the controlled could follow now, heading for the outskirts of the town.

“I think we’re clear,” Cub called back with a grin that said how happy he was to be free of the aliens’ control.

Luna smiled back at him, because she was just as happy to have made it. She was happy that *he* had been saved too. She wouldn’t have liked the idea of Cub still being back there while she and the others got away. She rode up closer to him, ready to call across to him, although she wasn’t quite sure what she was going to call. Maybe that she was glad he was there, maybe more than that.

Whatever she was going to say, the words fell silent in her throat as the shine of something up in the sky caught her eye, growing larger by the moment.

“A ship!” Luna called out as she looked at it square on.

The ship was one of the smaller ones, but this one looked sleeker than the others somehow, and more dangerous. If the others were worker bees built for carrying things up to the bigger ships, this one seemed more like a hornet, sharp-edged and deadly, designed to kill anything that got in its way.

“It’s coming this way!” Luna shouted.

It came in rapidly, and Luna found herself wondering where it had come from. The big ship above Sedona was gone. Even the world ship that had been there was gone, vanished from the sky as rapidly as it had come. This one must have come from one of the other ships, still hovering over other towns and cities to take what they could. From the speed it was coming in, it must have shot toward them as fast as its engines would carry it.

“They’ve sent a ship from another city for *us*?” Cub called out.

It didn’t make any sense that a ship could be there for them that fast, or that they could possibly mean that much to the aliens. Yet she couldn’t think of another reason why a ship like that would be coming toward them so fast, or so low, just a few hundred feet off the ground. Them coming back from being controlled seemed to have upset the aliens more than anything else they could have done.

“They must have sensed people breaking out of their control,” Luna called.

“I have found that the controlled hurry in quickly towards my efforts,” Ignatius explained from the back of Bear’s bike. “I think they’re trying to stop my attempts to help people.”

Luna thought about the aliens who had controlled her. How would they react to people breaking free of them? How would they respond to any loss of control when all they seemed to want was to *take* more and more?

Luna thought she saw something starting to glow at the front of the ship, a fiery orange that made it look as though someone had set light to a point on the vessel’s nose. She tried to decide if it might be a trick of the light, and then a far more horrible thought occurred to her.

“Everybody scatter!” she yelled, pulling her bike to one side so fast that it took everything she had to keep it upright.

The road ahead of their small convoy erupted in a blaze of energy that tore through the asphalt, sending dirt and stone flying in every direction. Luna saw one of the bikes skid and topple, the rider tumbling over the ground as the road disappeared from under them.

Luna went off road, ignoring the jolts and the judders that came from the uneven ground as rocks and potholes threatened to unseat her. Around her, she could see the other bikes following, heading into the rougher terrain, staying away from the straight line of the road as the alien ship shrieked overhead. Another gout of dirt and rocks flew up as it fired again, and then it was past them, banking sharply as it started to turn back toward them.

They were an easy target in the open. Luna could see the alien ship getting further away from them, lining up another run at them. If it fired at them from a distance, it would have plenty of time to aim and hit them all. They needed to find cover, and they needed to do it *now*.

Luna looked around and then pointed toward some of the red rock valleys close to Sedona.

“There!” she yelled. “It’s our only hope.”

She pushed her engine, the bike speeding forward with the others following in her wake. Dirt exploded around them as the ship made another pass, and for a moment or two Luna couldn’t see anything ahead. When the cloud of dust cleared enough for her to see again, she had to veer left sharply to avoid the remains of a tree, torn apart by the latest blast. Luna just hoped that she was leading the others in the right direction.

They headed into the valley, plunging past its mouth and speeding down it. Energy bolts slammed into the walls, sending dust up into the air and sending rocks tumbling so that Luna had to swerve and dodge to avoid them. They rumbled and bounced as they fell, one shooting past her head, close enough that she had to duck down to avoid it.

“It’s coming in lower!” Cub called out from somewhere close to Luna. Luna knew that she ought to keep her eyes on the way ahead through the valley, but she couldn’t stop herself from risking a glance back.

The alien ship was flying barely above ground level now, moving into the valley on their tail as it tried to line up its next shots.

“Faster,” Luna called out.

“We can’t lose it,” Cub called back.

“We don’t need to lose it,” Luna shouted. “We just need to find out how fast it can turn.”

She saw Cub grin as he understood, and their group of bikers hurried forward, pushing into the valley.

“Hold on, Bobby,” Luna said.

Luna clung to her bike, taking the twists and turns as fast as she dared, then faster still. The red rocks of the cliffs towered above her in misshapen stacks, the rocks that tumbled as energy blasts hit them a reminder of just how easily all of this could go wrong. One turn taken too fast, one twitch of the handlebars in the wrong direction, and she and Bobby would hammer into the walls of the valley, far too fast to survive.

Luna gripped her handlebars tight, hunched down over them, and rode faster.

She dared a glance back. The alien ship was still there, taking the twists and turns with them, firing at random when it couldn’t line up the perfect shot. It swung from one side to the other as it sped along the valley, and then, without warning, Luna saw one edge of it clip a wall.

“Watch out!” she yelled, as it bounced from one wall to the next, struggling to correct its flight as it ricocheted like a pool ball, sparks flying as it hit one wall, then another, angling down toward the valley’s rocky floor.

The noise as it struck the earth seemed to fill the world, dust flying up as it plowed in nose first until everything behind it was obscured. Luna and the others had to keep riding flat out just to stay ahead of it. They were running out of room, though, because the valley was coming to a halt, sealed in by a wall of rock that was punctured only by the opening of a storm drain. Luna rode toward that far end, hoping the ship would stop before it crushed them all against the wall. She pulled up next to the wall, wincing as the ship got closer.

Gradually, though, it slowed, squealing and scraping its way along like a plate dropped from a table until finally, rattling, it ground to a halt.

Luna pulled up in front of it, the others spreading out in a half circle around it, engines still running. She heard a hiss of escaping air as a hatch near the top opened, and she stood in shock as a figure staggered out.

This wasn't one of the controlled. There was nothing human about the spindly, insect-like figure who clambered down from the hatch, spiny plates looking like armor, but broken armor, with rents that leaked clear fluid onto the ground as it advanced.

"Is that them?" she heard Ignatius wonder aloud. "Is that what the aliens look like?"

"Does it matter what they look like when we know what they want?" Luna asked.

"But we can study it," Ignatius said. "We need to try to capture it."

It kept approaching, reaching for them as if even now it would find a way to kill them.

"Get it!" Bear yelled, and the Dustsides bikers fell on it with fists and pipes and knives, striking again and again with anything they had. Luna heard the armored plates crack with a sickening sound that reminded Luna far too much of someone stepping on a beetle.

"No," Ignatius said, "there's so much we can *learn*."

Right then, however, Luna felt as though they'd learned the most important lessons: they'd learned what one of their enemies looked like, and they'd learned that they could die.

Then a light flickered on the front of the ship, twisting in the air, taking the shape of a tall, hairless figure that looked nothing like the creature they had just killed. It spoke, and some technology in the hologram translated the words, the same way it had with the boxes at the slave camp.

"You have killed one of our servants," the being said. "But it is not of the Purest. It does not matter. You do not matter. You are an obstruction to be removed, and you will be, unless you submit now."

"We know what that feels like," Luna shouted back at it. "And we broke free. We're going to break *everyone* free!"

"You will not obstruct the Hive. You will die."

It flickered out of sight, and in the sky beyond where it had been, Luna thought she could see the specks of more of the ships closing in. It seemed that the aliens weren't holding back when it came to killing them.

"We need to get out of here," Luna said.

"There's no easy way past the ship," Cub said, "and if we ride out onto open ground, they'll pick us off easily."

"Then we need to go into the storm drain," Luna said.

Bear looked over at it, then at her and Cub. "I don't like leaving the bikes."

"I think it's that or die, Dad," Cub said.

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